

Their Wonder Years: Fall 98

Chapter 91: In Class After the Show

[979 words]

The hallway was abuzz as students pretended to be studying or adjusting backpacks, but really, everyone was watching them.

No one asked questions. No one dared.

The silence said it all:

Who the hell is that guy?

Is this a prank?

Is this legal?

Is he a celebrity? Some prince?

Why does he look so calm?

And most chilling of all:

What if this is just the beginning?

Bharath sat down in the lecture hall, Marisol curled up beside him, her legs folded on the chair like she lived there.

Ravi and Jorge took their spots behind them.

Ravi leaned forward and whispered, "The guy in the back row is still staring. He hasn't blinked in two minutes."

Jorge added, "He just dropped his pencil for the third time."

Marisol smiled lazily and tucked her hand into Bharath's. "I like this."

He turned to her. "You're not... embarrassed?"

She lifted an eyebrow. "Why would I be? We're not doing anything wrong."

He nodded slowly. "It's just-"

"Babe," she said softly, "the looks don't bother me. They'll get used to it. And if they don't? Let them stare."

From the back of the room, a voice muttered, "He must know hypnosis."

Jorge choked on his laugh. "Or ancient Kama Sutra scrolls."

Ravi whispered, "Or maybe... maybe women just *like* him."

Everyone stared at him. "...Okay, yeah, mind control sounds more realistic."

There was a strange energy in the room.

Ayesha felt it the moment she stepped into the lecture hall. It wasn't just the usual Monday groans or midterm dread. It was the hush-before-a-storm kind of energy - a low murmur running through the air like static clinging to skin.

She slid into her usual spot next to Zara, dropping her notebook onto the desk.

"You feel that?" she muttered.

Zara looked up from applying her lip gloss. "Feel what?"

Ayesha gestured vaguely around the room. "Everyone's whispering."

Zara paused, scanning the space. A small cluster of guys in the back were murmuring animatedly, gesturing toward the door. Two girls in the front row were already giggling before class had even started.

"What's going on?" Ayesha asked, frowning.

Before Zara could respond, the door opened again - and in walked Bharath.

With Marisol.

Together.

Like, *very* together.

Marisol was holding his arm. Not just resting her hand there, but actually *hugging* it. Like she was letting the world know it belonged to her.

They didn't say a word. Just walked past the rows of seats calmly, like this wasn't weird. Like the whole lecture hall wasn't turning its head and watching.

They took two open seats near the middle, Bharath sliding in first. Marisol stayed close - her hand brushing against his thigh briefly before she reached for her bag. Her hair was tied up, but even from where Ayesha sat, she could see the red mark on Marisol's neck.

A love bite?

Ayesha blinked.

She'd heard the rumors earlier that morning - something about a dramatic kiss near the CoC building - but she'd rolled her eyes. Georgia Tech was full of lonely nerds who'd turn a smile into a marriage proposal in their heads.

But this?

This was real.

Even Zara noticed. "Okay, what the *hell?*" she whispered. "Since when is Marisol playing the girlfriend game?"

Ayesha tried to keep her voice steady. "I thought she was just using him for tutoring. But..."

She trailed off.

Because Marisol wasn't acting like someone leveraging a dork for midterm help. She was glowing. Relaxed. Possessive.

Like she *wanted* to be seen with Bharath.

Like she didn't care who knew.

Bharath was saying something softly - Ayesha couldn't hear the words, but it made Marisol laugh and rest her head briefly on his shoulder before swatting him playfully.

Ayesha's stomach tightened. She looked away, trying to focus on her notebook, but she couldn't stop the memories that came flooding back.

The airport ride.

Back in August.

He'd been so friendly. So genuine. That quiet confidence under the shyness - and that smile. They'd talked the whole way from the airport to campus. It had been easy. Natural. For a brief, stupid moment, she thought maybe-

Then Zara had seen him. Said he looked like a “Fresh off the boat nerd.” And Ayesha - stupid, shallow Ayesha - had laughed along and slowly pulled away. Told herself it was survival. That popularity had a price.

But she'd never *hated* him. Not really. And now...

Now he was sitting in class next to the hottest girl in their section, like he *belonged*.

And somehow, no one was laughing anymore.

It was hard to focus.

Even Professor Carmichael - a man who once yelled at a student for sneezing during a quiz - looked like he'd forgotten how time worked. He called roll twice, pronounced Bharath's name as Borat before giving up and muttering something about “early-onset fog brain.” The chalk screeched across the board as he fumbled a basic derivative. At one point, he stared out the window like he was remembering the girl who got away.

A few rows up, one student whispered, “I think he's having an existential crisis.”

Another replied, “We all are.”

The room practically vibrated with suppressed questions. Eyes darted toward Bharath and Marisol over and over. A few students just stopped pretending to take notes and openly watched them like they were a live episode of General Hospital.

A guy across the aisle leaned toward his friend and whispered, “I saw them together near Tech Green this morning. She was holding his hand like she'd kill anyone who tried to take it.”

Another girl chimed in, “But *wasn't* he kissing the other girl? The older one?”

“Yeah. Like... really kissing her. With *commitment*.”

“They say Marisol just stood there and smiled.”

“Maybe it's a study group thing?”

“Yeah, I always kiss my group members. With tongue.”

A beat.

“...Respect.”

Zara leaned toward Ayesha, frowning. “Are we sure he's not part of some... international exchange program for Casanovas?”

“Or a secret heir?” someone muttered nearby. “Like a Tamil prince?”

“Honestly, he’s probably just really good at coding *and* cuddling,” came another voice.

A guy near the back slapped the table in defeat. “I’ve been going to the gym for six months and all I got was a shin splint and mild depression!”

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

Chapter 92: Hallway Kiss Apocalypse

[1,329 words]

The world outside was still gray with sleep, painted in streaks of soft gold from the early morning sun. But inside Lecture Hall 107, the atmosphere had already reached critical mass.

Students didn’t so much leave class as they leaked out in waves. Dazed, slow, buzzing with the kind of confusion usually reserved for final exams or discovering your roommate has been secretly living as a furry for three semesters.

Everyone tried to act normal. No one succeeded.

A guy in a backwards cap tripped on the stairs trying to get one last look at Marisol. He caught himself on the railing, whispered “holy shit,” and kept walking backwards like he was filming his own documentary titled **I Witnessed Divinity and Lived**.

A freshman girl stood frozen in the aisle, staring into space and muttering to herself, “They both kissed him like he invented kissing. They invented kissing. I need to speak to the patent office.”

One T.A. (poor, sweet, overworked Priya) stood outside with her clipboard and forgot how to read. She just held the attendance sheet like it was a sacred scroll and whispered, “I need to lie down. I need to lie down forever.”

Ayesha was packing her things in silence, though her brain was a full Category 5 tornado.

Zara, her backpack already half-zipped, finally said what they were both thinking: “Okay. That was weird. But like... hot-weird. Not bad-weird. Right?”

Ayesha just nodded numbly. “Uh-huh.”

Then came the sound.

Heels clicking on linoleum.

Confident. Graceful. Like trouble wearing Louboutins.

“Bharath!”

The hallway froze.

Heads turned so fast necks should have snapped.

Even the vending machine paused its eternal hum, as if it too needed a moment to process.

There she was.

Sarah Goldstein, in her flowing peach sundress that looked like it had been personally approved by Aphrodite’s stylist. The fabric clung and floated in all the right places. Her breasts (God forgive the witnesses) jiggled with every step like they were independently auditioning for a shampoo commercial directed by Fellini. Her hair was down and gleaming like it had its own personal lighting team. The fluorescent lights seemed to soften just for her, as if the university had secretly installed mood lighting in the corridor overnight.

“Oh my god,” someone whispered.

“She’s actually real! This is happening!” muttered another frantically. “She wasn’t in a fever dream.”

A third voice, in absolute disbelief: “That’s also his girlfriend? Her AND her?!”

Sarah didn’t walk so much as glide. Her eyes locked on Bharath like she hadn’t seen him in years, like he was both dessert and salvation and the only Wi-Fi signal in a dead zone.

Ayesha instinctively turned, caught in the undertow like everyone else.

Sarah reached him.

And pounced.

A kiss that didn't just break rules, it abolished them. Tongue, hips, fingers in his hair. Like she was charging her soul through his mouth. Like she needed to refill her whole bloodstream with Bharath-flavored oxygen.

Students gasped. A girl dropped her textbook with a thud that echoed like a gunshot. A guy behind Ayesha whispered, "That's not PG-13, man. That's NC-17 with grandparental advisory required."

Someone in the corner mumbled, "I've been kissed, but not like that."

A student leaned against the wall, stunned: "He must have cheat codes. He's not playing on normal difficulty."

Another guy just crouched, hands on knees, chanting to himself like a broken mantra: "Why God? I studied. I did everything right. I even joined Tech when I could have joined Arizona State."

And Marisol?

Marisol just stood nearby, leaning against the lockers like a queen overseeing her kingdom. She smiled—genuinely—like Sarah's tongue down Bharath's throat was part of a morning routine. Like this was just another Monday.

Ayesha's brain short-circuited.

Then Sarah turned, lips still slightly red, eyes glinting, and reached for Marisol.

And kissed her.

Not a kiss of obligation. Not curiosity.

This was deliberate. Familiar. Playful.

Like she'd done it before.

Marisol kissed her back without hesitation, her hand sliding to Sarah's waist, pulling her closer for one long, languid second before they parted with matching smirks.

Zara's jaw hit the floor so hard it should have cracked the tile. "Did they just...?"

"They did," Ayesha whispered, voice hollow.

Two guys walking past physically walked into a wall.

Someone gasped, "That man is my hero."

Another girl grabbed her friend's arm. "I've been single for two years and this man has two girlfriends who kiss each other?"

Sarah pulled away from Marisol with a grin that could launch ships or end wars. "I needed a refill. I'll be back for lunch."

Then she turned and walked down the hallway like a catwalk model on a farewell tour, leaving behind only the scent of lavender, legend, and collective cardiac events.

Silence reigned for a full ten seconds.

Then a guy moaned, "He's got both. He's got both... Two! In a campus where there's a 5:1 ratio. What even am I?"

The hallway practically trembled under the weight of shattered assumptions.

Ayesha couldn't breathe.

Not because of the heat, though the air in the corridor suddenly felt thick, but because her lungs had simply forgotten how to expand.

Across the corridor, Marisol was leaning against Bharath's side like she was born there, casual and cozy, like he was her morning coffee and she wasn't sharing him with a woman who looked like a literal dream.

And Bharath?

Bharath looked like he belonged.

Not cocky. Not smug. Just centered. Easy. Like all of this made sense. Like he hadn't just been kissed by a junior who looked like a literal dream and then kissed back by Marisol with no drama, no accusations, no damage control.

The hallway buzzed around them like an aftershock.

Whispers.

Laughter.

More disbelief.

And through it all, he stood calm, kind, a little flushed maybe, but so grounded it made Ayesha want to scream.

How?

How had he pulled this off?

She watched as Marisol reached up and casually fixed a stray curl that had fallen across Bharath's forehead. Sarah had already disappeared around the corner, but the ghost of her presence lingered like perfume in a closed room.

Ayesha finally remembered how lungs worked and sucked in a breath.

Zara grabbed her arm. "We need to talk, girl. Like. Right now."

They stumbled toward the stairwell like survivors of a natural disaster.

Behind them, a guy in a GT hoodie was still crouched against the wall, muttering, "I prayed every night. Every night. And this is what I get? A front-row seat to someone else's harem anime?"

Another student, clearly a film major, pulled out his camcorder and started filming the empty hallway like it was evidence in a court case.

"This is going on a tape. Title: 'When your classmate has two girlfriends and zero survival instincts.'"

A girl with blue hair and a nose ring leaned against the lockers and sighed dreamily. "I've decided I'm no longer heterosexual on Tuesdays. That was too powerful."

Ayesha and Zara made it to the stairwell and collapsed against the railing.

"Okay," Zara said, breathing hard. "Scale of one to 'I need therapy,' how destroyed are you right now?"

Ayesha stared at the ceiling. "I think I just witnessed a miracle. Or a war crime. I can't tell."

Zara laughed, a little hysterically. "He kissed both of them. In public. In the hallway. And they kissed each other. And no one died. No one even threw a punch. What timeline is this?"

"I don't know," Ayesha whispered. "But I want to live in it."

They were quiet for a second.

Then Zara said, "Do you think... he's recruiting?"

Ayesha snorted so hard she almost choked. "Zara."

“I’m just saying! If he’s collecting goddesses, maybe there’s an application form. I can write a cover letter. ‘Dear Bharath, I’m emotionally stable, I can parallel park, and I’ve never once cried during a rom-com. Please consider me for the third slot.’”

Ayesha laughed until tears came.

Down the hall, the vending machine finally resumed humming, like it too had needed a moment to recover.

Somewhere in the distance, someone yelled, “I need to speak to the dean! This is unfair distribution of hotness!”

And somewhere deeper in the building, Bharath, blissfully unaware of the campus-wide existential crisis he’d just triggered, walked toward his next class with Marisol’s hand in his, still tasting Sarah on his lips, and wondering why everyone kept staring at him like he’d personally invented gravity.

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

Chapter 93: He’s Got Both and I Have Nothing!

[1,169 words]

Zara broke the silence. “They’re sharing him.”

Ayesha tried to shrug, tried to sound neutral. “Maybe he’s just a placeholder.”

Zara gave her a look. “With tongue?”

Ayesha gripped her notebook until the spirals dug into her palm. The metal bit in, and still, she didn’t let go.

Because if she did, something else might snap.

She looked away from the scene - from Marisol’s easy smile, from the shadow of Sarah’s kiss still lingering in the air - and stared down at the blue-and-gold school logo on the tile floor.

And that’s when the voice in her head finally screamed what she didn’t want to hear.

You chose wrong.

She'd told herself it was strategic.

On Day One, when she and Bharath had shared a cab from the airport - all nerves and new beginnings - he'd been sweet. Endearingly awkward but still charming. The kind of guy who listened. Who laughed at her jokes like he actually meant it. Who looked at her like she *mattered*.

For a moment, she thought maybe...

But then Day Two happened.

Zara's snide comments. The disapproving once-over. "You're talking to *him*?"

And Ayesha, like a fool, had laughed. Had shrugged. Had distanced herself. One step at a time, she edged toward the cool crowd. Toward safety. Toward what she thought success looked like.

It worked. Sort of.

Her rise had been fast. Her name floated around the freshman girls like a brand. People invited her to everything. Upperclassmen flirted. Guys looked. Girls imitated.

But it was never *free*.

The parties were exhausting. The guys - older, bolder - often treated her like decoration. Their hands slid too low, too often. They smelled like vodka and entitlement. And when she'd flinch or pull away, they'd laugh like she was a silly little girl.

She justified it.

It's just part of the game.

This is the price. Everyone pays it.

Just stay sharp. Stay cold. Stay wanted.

But each time she laughed off a grope or let a hand linger too long on her waist because the guy was a senior with access to off-campus housing, something inside her shriveled a little more.

She hadn't had a real conversation - a real, *kind* moment - since August.

Since that cab ride.

With *him*.

She glanced back across the hallway.

Bharath was saying something to Marisol, and she laughed again - that effortless kind of laugh that sounded *real*, like it had breath behind it.

And it *killed* her.

Because Marisol *wasn't* the nice girl from orientation. She was sharp. Sarcastic. Territorial.

Yet with Bharath, she was soft.

Gentle.

Almost... protective.

It didn't make sense.

Marisol *should've* been the one with the upper hand - the one using him.

That's what Ayesha had assumed all along.

But now? She looked like she would bite anyone who tried to hurt him.

And Sarah?

Sarah had looked like she could have anyone - *anyone* - on this campus. But she had come back, in the middle of a school day, just for a kiss.

Ayesha shook her head.

It wasn't fair.

Bharath hadn't changed a thing.

Still the same quiet boy with the low voice and that weird, deliberate way of speaking. Still the same eyes that looked straight at you like he wasn't distracted. Still soft-spoken. Still humble.

He didn't chase clout.

He didn't try to be cool.

He just *was* - and now?

Now he was famous.

And her?

Ayesha had reshaped herself into the perfect campus butterfly - stylish, witty, part of every important circle. She was *visible*. She was *relevant*.

And she was so damn tired.

Zara's constant edge although she was a true friend. The backhanded compliments from the others. The fake friendships that lasted only until someone prettier entered the room. The way people only wanted to talk to her when there was a party coming up or a guy needed someone on his arm.

She hadn't told anyone about the time a grad student had cornered her outside a frat house and whispered something disgusting in her ear, his hand gripping her wrist too tightly.

She hadn't even *processed* the way she sometimes laughed when older men leered - because it was easier than starting a scene, easier than being "the girl who made drama."

She used to love talking.

Now it felt like every conversation came with a filter and a price.

That taxi ride in August?

It had been the last time she spoke freely. With someone who looked at her without calculation. Without agenda.

She remembered what Bharath had said when she told him she was nervous about GT.

"You'll be great. You have that energy. Like... you light up the room."

He meant it. Not like a pickup line. Just - meant it.

She remembered laughing. Genuinely. No performance. No armor.

And then she gave that up.

For what? For Zara?

For frat mixers and shallow eyes and that horrible, constant game of "Who's looking at whom"?

Bharath had kept being himself.

And now?

Now he had *real* friends.

People who *wanted* him - not because he was convenient or hot or popular, but because he *mattered* to them.

And she had Zara.

Who was currently speculating in a half-loud whisper whether Bharath was “a really polite wizard” or just “some kind of sex alien from Chennai.”

Ayesha didn't respond.

Because her throat was thick with something sharp and miserable.

She looked at Bharath again.

Not his body - though now that she noticed, he *was* fit. Not bulky, not showy - just lean, cut. Quietly powerful. Like he'd always had it but never showed it off.

He didn't need to. Because he wasn't trying to impress anyone. And somehow, *that* had become magnetic. The universe had rewritten the rules, and no one had told her. She had followed the script: flirt, play hard to get, stay pretty, stay visible.

But Bharath had thrown out the script and written his own part - and now he was living it, while she was stuck onstage reciting lines she didn't believe in anymore.

Zara snapped her fingers in front of her. “You good?”

Ayesha blinked. “Yeah. Just... tired.”

Zara scoffed. “Girl, same. I need, like, three Red Bulls and a good facial.”

Ayesha forced a nod.

But her mind was far away. Somewhere between August and now. Somewhere between the sweet boy in the cab and the legend walking the halls with two women who looked like magazine covers and treated him like he was *worth* the world.

She had thrown him away. And now? She was watching *everyone else* pick him up. That was it. She couldn't take this anymore. Who the hell did he think he was? Time to let that nerd know his true place in the *real* world.

The hallway had barely begun recovering from *The Kiss* - Sarah's volcanic display, the girl-on-girl smooch, and the casual "I'll be back for lunch" that had broken at least three freshmen's brains.

People were still murmuring. A guy by the bulletin board was whispering about "tantric coding sessions." A girl near the stairwell declared, "This is better than anything on *Dawson's Creek*." A crowd had formed - not intentionally, but magnetically, orbiting the gravity field around Bharath, Marisol, and the now-departed Sarah.

And in the center of it all?

Bharath, standing slightly dazed, lips a little swollen, shirt a little rumpled.

Marisol, arm hooked through his, smiling like this was all exactly as it should be.

Then-

"You should be ashamed of yourself!"

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

Chapter 94: You Don't Get To Touch His Story

[1,611 words]

"You should be ashamed of yourself!"

The voice rang out like a slap.

The hallway *froze*.

Everyone turned.

Even Jorge, three floors up, swore he heard the sound of verbal violence brewing and stuck his head out over the mezzanine railing.

Ayesha stormed forward, her notebooks forgotten, her cheeks blazing red - not from embarrassment, but rage. Not rational. Not thought through. Just *fire*.

She jabbed a finger toward Bharath. "What the hell was that, huh? What are you trying to prove with that whole... whole *pornographic circus*?"

Bharath blinked, stunned. "What-"

"You think this is cute?" she spat. "Walking around like some campus Casanova with your lips on one girl and your hands on another like it's *normal*? What's next? Public threesomes in the courtyard?"

Several students choked on nothing. One girl gasped, "*Oh my god*," and immediately fumbled for her bag as if leaving might make the moment less nuclear.

"You think you're hot stuff now, huh?" Ayesha continued, voice rising. "You stupid, arrogant *FOB*! You think these girls *really* care about you? They're using you! You're too dumb to see it! You should go back to India before you embarrass yourself *more* than this!"

Gasps rippled like thunderclaps.

Bharath flinched - but Marisol did not.

She stepped forward slowly, like a predator deciding just how to end the conversation. Her smile evaporated.

"Say that again," she said, her voice a low, even knife.

Ayesha hesitated. "I-"

"No, say *it again* puta. You called him a FOB, right? Fresh Off the Boat?" Marisol took a step forward. "You just insulted the smartest, kindest, most disciplined guy on this campus? For what? What did he do to you?"

Ayesha looked around, realizing too late that *everyone* was watching now. Even Professor Carmichael had peeked his balding head out of the lecture hall door like a meerkat spotting lions.

Marisol's eyes narrowed. "You don't get to say his name. You don't get to touch his story. You had your chance. You rode in a cab with him, remember? When he was alone and new and didn't know anybody? And you were nice to him - until it wasn't *cool* to be."

Ayesha looked like she'd been slapped.

"And now that he's *happy* - now that he's got people who love him and laugh with him and lick and suck the soul out of him every morning-" Marisol paused as a stunned gasp echoed from someone by the vending machines. "*Now you've got a problem?*"

“Hey, chill,” Ayesha said weakly, lifting both hands. “Let’s just-”

“No.” Marisol cut her off. Her voice was cold steel now. “You *don’t* get to talk down to him because he didn’t bow to your popularity game. You think he’s too stupid to see people using him? Girl, he has *us*. We don’t *need* to play games. We chose each other.”

A moment of silence. Someone whistled loudly.

Then Marisol dropped the final blow, soft but devastating:

“You’re not mad because he’s kissing someone. You’re mad because it isn’t *you*.”

Ayesha’s eyes went wide. Her mouth opened, then closed. No words came.

A few feet away, a guy actually muttered, “Fatality.” Another whispered, “We have to say ‘Finish Her’ first.” Somewhere, someone dropped their folder and didn’t bother picking it up.

Ayesha looked down.

Her voice, when it came, was barely above a whisper. “You don’t know anything about me.”

Marisol shrugged. “I don’t need to. I just need you to keep his name out of your mouth. If you had something real to say, you should’ve said it back in August.”

Ayesha looked like she might cry.

But she turned and walked away - stiff-backed, humiliated, furious, *broken*.

The echo of Ayesha’s heels faded down the hallway like the dying notes of a tragedy that ended before it even began.

Everyone remained frozen.

Still staring.

Still processing.

It was like watching a car crash in slow motion, followed by an impromptu victory parade that no one knew how to join.

Marisol turned, exhaled slowly, and looked up at Bharath.

He hadn’t moved.

His shoulders were stiff, his jaw tight, his face flushed in a dozen shades of confusion. His eyes darted from the retreating figure of Ayesha to the crowd, to Marisol, to nowhere in particular. A war of emotions crossed his features - anger, shame, disbelief... and a deep, raw ache that hadn't caught up to him yet.

"Amor," Marisol said, voice low now. "You alright?"

Bharath's lips parted. "I... didn't do anything."

"No, baby," she said, stepping closer. "You *did everything right*."

She cupped his cheek gently.

"You didn't change. That's why you're loved."

He blinked, like she'd reminded him how to breathe.

And then, slowly, he nodded.

That was all Marisol needed.

She turned back to the crowd, her eyes scanning dozens of stunned students, open-mouthed faculty, and a few who were still too shocked to blink.

And then she *raised her voice*.

"Listen up!"

Every head turned.

Jorge, now sitting on the stairs with a bag of M&Ms, straightened. "Que carajo! She's going full Latina lioness again."

Marisol stood tall, voice crisp, loud, and clear.

"Let me make something very clear. If anyone here has a problem with Bharath, you can bring it to *me*."

A ripple.

She held her ground.

"And if I'm not around?" she added, eyes blazing. "Then go to *Sarah*. We'll take turns. Just like we did on him this morning and last night."

Laughter broke out in spurts - startled, delighted, unhinged. A girl near the window let out an actual whoop. A guy slapped his friend's shoulder and said, "*Bro*, they do it twice a day each together!"

Marisol stepped back to Bharath, looped her arms around his neck, and pulled him into a kiss.

Not a short one.

Not just a declaration.

But a *consecration*.

The hallway *exploded*.

Applause. Whistles. Cheering.

A guy threw his folder in the air like he'd just witnessed a spiritual awakening.

A girl actually fanned herself with a copy of *Calculus: Early Transcendentals*.

Professor Carmichael dropped his coffee. "What in *God's name* is happening today?"

Another professor leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, muttering, "I was valedictorian, you know. Never got *anything* close to this. I'm going to reassess my life with my psychologist now."

One of the campus tour guides, passing with a group of confused parents and high school juniors, blinked at the scene and whispered to herself, "I'm going to have to change the route."

The energy didn't fade.

Students didn't walk away. They lingered - even the ones late to class. A few turned to the nearest person and asked, "Did you get all of that? Did someone record it?" One guy tried to scribble what he remembered into a composition notebook like a field reporter at Normandy.

Two business majors debated whether this was viral marketing for a new student club.

The girls were giddy. The guys were flabbergasted.

But the overwhelming consensus?

Something *massive* had just happened.

"I thought this was an engineering school," one sophomore muttered. "When did it become a soap opera?"

"It's not a soap opera," someone corrected. "It's *mythology*. We're living in a legend."

Three different students already started referring to the second-floor hallway outside Room 213 as *The Temple*.

By lunch, someone had chalked on the sidewalk:

HERE STOOD BHARATH, BELOVED BY TWO 10s

People didn't need video. They had *witnesses* - dozens of them. Like oral historians. "I saw her slap down the FOB line with her *whole chest*, bro," one guy told his study group in the library. "And then the other girl came in with a *swoop kiss*. It was like watching *Xena: Warrior Princess* - but with physics homework."

A girl at the Student Center whispered, "There were three 10s in that scene. Three. Do you know how rare that is? *We're lucky to even have three 10s on this campus total!*"

Another group in the quad debated whether Bharath had magical powers.

One guy swore he saw his eyes glow.

"I think he's been studying the Kama Sutra since birth."

"Maybe he's actually a prince."

"Maybe he's got a 200 IQ and a 12-pack."

"Yes... that's it. Like Professor X before he got paralyzed," someone said reverently.

Everyone nodded.

It was the only logical explanation.

They stepped away from the crowd at last.

-

Around the corner of the building, behind a row of vending machines and abandoned flyers, Bharath leaned against the wall and exhaled.

His heart was still racing. His hands were still shaking.

But his eyes?

They were focused on Marisol.

"You didn't have to do that," he said softly. "The shouting. The scene. The kiss."

Marisol shrugged. "You think I *regret* it?"

He gave her a small smile. "You went nuclear."

"I went honest," she said, stepping close again. "I don't care what they think. I care that *you* know - nobody gets to make you feel small. Not Ayesha. Not Zara. Not any of these clowns whispering and pointing."

He studied her face - fierce, beautiful, raw.

And then he touched her cheek gently.

"I'm still trying to believe this is real."

"It's real, baby," she said. "You're real. And if that girl or anyone else tries to make you doubt that again..." She leaned in close, voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "They'll get round two."

He chuckled.

Then, quietly: "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being my voice when I couldn't find mine."

Marisol kissed him softly this time - not for the crowd, not for the legend.

Just for him.

"Always."

By the next day, the Campus Visitor Office updated their tour guides' scripts.

"And to your left is the Mathematics building, built in 1964, where Georgia Tech experienced its most dramatic romantic confrontation since the great tie-dye scandal of '72."

"This hallway," one guide added with theatrical flair, "is where three 10s and one freshman changed the power balance of the Institute. Legends say if you walk it at the right time, you can still feel the heat."

"We have three 10s in GT? At the same time?"

"You can't argue with history my friend."

And in the dorms, Ravi tacked a homemade sign above a couch in the common room of Smith:

"You don't get to touch his story." – Marisol, Patron Saint of the ones who want to get their enemies Bitch Slapped

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

Chapter 95: Let the Halloween Girlfriend Draft of 1998 Begin

[1,682 words]

The Tekken 3 theme music blared from the television like a war anthem, all synthesized drums and electric guitar riffs that had somehow become the soundtrack to their Friday nights. Tyrel's thumb slammed furiously into the PlayStation controller as Eddy Gordo spun across the screen, legs flailing in capoeira chaos: a whirlwind of kicks that looked more like breakdancing than actual fighting. Ravi cursed in Hindi under his breath, mashing buttons as if his life depended on it, his baseball cap sliding forward over his eyes with each frantic motion.

"BHAI, you can't just spam the same move!" Ravi yelled, twisting in his seat until he was practically sideways on the couch. "That's cheating, yaar! There's no skill in that!"

Tyrel didn't even blink, his eyes locked on the screen with the focus of a chess grandmaster. "Ain't no rules in love, war, or Tekken, my man. That's gospel. Read it in Corinthians, I think."

"You're not even blocking, yaar! You're just pressing kick over and over!" Ravi's voice cracked with indignation. "My grandmother could beat you if you actually had to use strategy!"

"Strategy, baby. It's called mental warfare." Tyrel leaned back slightly, one hand behind his head now, controlling Eddy with casual precision. "Sun Tzu wrote about this exact situation. I'm pretty sure."

"Sun Tzu did NOT write about button-mashing!" Ravi shouted, his character getting launched into the air for the third time in a row.

"You guys are loud as hell," Jorge muttered from the armchair, lounging backwards with his legs draped over one arm, methodically working through a family-size bag of Flamin' Hot Cheetos while watching them like it was the world's most entertaining spectator sport. Red dust coated his fingertips. "It's a fighting game, not a telenovela. You don't need a dramatic monologue every time you lose."

"I'm not losing!" Ravi protested. "I'm... strategically preserving my energy for the comeback."

"That's what losing people call losing," Jorge said, crunching another Cheeto.

Marisol peeked out from the hallway where she and the girls had been whispering in conspiratorial tones for the past twenty minutes, their voices rising and falling like they were planning something that required CIA-level secrecy.

"Qué telenovela?" she murmured to Camila, fighting back a smile.

"The one where the boys think they matter," Camila whispered, biting back a grin as she glanced at the living room chaos. "Chapter twelve: the audacity continues."

Sarah adjusted her glasses and surveyed their handiwork with the satisfaction of an architect reviewing blueprints. "Ready with the names?"

"All set!" Camila said, uncapping a pink marker with a flourish. She began writing in block letters across the large foam-core poster board they'd borrowed (stolen) from the engineering lab:

"OPERATION TRICK OR TREAT HEARTS: HALLOWEEN DRAFT 1998"

The letters were bold, confident, slightly slanted. The kind of handwriting that meant business.

In the living room, Bharath sat cross-legged on the rug, politely amused by the chaos unfolding before him, occasionally pushing his glasses up his nose as he tried to follow the on-screen action. He'd long ago given up trying to understand the unwritten rules of their Friday night Tekken tournaments.

"Tyrel, is it normal to scream like this when losing?" he asked, blinking at the screen as Ravi let out a cry of triumph.

"Boy, please. I ain't losin'. I'm just letting Ravi feel himself for a minute before I crush his dreams." Tyrel executed another spinning kick combo. "It's called being a gracious host."

Ravi threw his hands up, controller dangling from his fingers. "This is emotional manipulation! He's literally breakdancing me into depression! This is what my therapist warned me about!"

"You don't have a therapist," Bharath said mildly.

"I'm gonna need one after this!"

Jorge snorted, nearly choking on a Cheeto. "Ravi, you're pressing triangle like you're trying to buy something from a vending machine that ate your dollar. Just accept defeat with dignity, hermano."

"I play better under pressure," Ravi muttered, adjusting his cap with the determination of someone who absolutely did not play better under pressure. "And bhai, if I win this match, I want ice cream. That's the rule."

"You made that rule up just now," Bharath pointed out, ever the voice of reason.

"Exactly. That's how rules work in America. You just declare them."

"I don't think that's how democracy works," Bharath said.

"Democracy is just peer pressure from people you've never met," Ravi said, mashing buttons wildly.

Behind them, Marisol quickly added bullet points beneath the draft title, her handwriting smaller and neater than Camila's bold strokes. Sarah stood back, arms crossed, surveying their work like a general reviewing battle plans.

"All set with LaTasha's profile?"

"Yup. And I found a yearbook photo of Nandita from her freshman directory. She's adorable. Glasses. Shy smile. Brainy vibe. Ravi's gonna combust when he sees her." Camila tapped the photo they'd carefully taped to the board.

Sarah taped up the first columns like she was unveiling the results of a science fair, or perhaps the trajectory of nuclear physics research. "Tyrel and Ravi are in for a wild ride. This is going to be beautiful."

"Or a disaster," Marisol added cheerfully. "Either way, entertaining."

Back on the couch, Tyrel had just delivered the finishing blow. Another spinning kick that sent Ravi's character crashing to the ground in defeat. The "K.O." flashed across the screen. Tyrel leaned back, controller resting on his chest like a badge of honor, a satisfied grin spreading across his face.

"Dawg, I swear. Y'all hear somethin'? Sound like secrets bein' cooked up in the back." He tilted his head toward the hallway, suddenly suspicious. "Like schemes. Conspiracies. The overthrow of small governments."

Ravi paused mid-complaint, brow furrowed. He turned slowly. "Wait... what are you guys doing back there?"

Bharath turned slowly and noticed the foam board for the first time, squinting at the colorful writing. "Is that... your handwriting, Sarah?"

Sarah spun on her heel like she was about to host Wheel of Fortune, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. She'd been waiting for this moment.

"Gentlemen," she said with mock-serious flair, pushing her glasses up her nose like a professor about to deliver a groundbreaking lecture, "you are cordially invited to bear witness to a social experiment unlike anything ever seen before on or around Georgia Tech's campus. Presenting: Operation Trick or Treat Hearts: The Draft™."

She gestured at the board like Vanna White on a sugar rush, one hand sweeping dramatically across the surface. Camila followed, tapping the freshly inked candidate names under two columns labeled "Tyrel" and "Ravi" with a pointer she'd fashioned from a rolled-up magazine.

Tyrel blinked, sitting up straighter. "Wait, hold up. What y'all mean Operation? That sounds like somethin' with clipboards and consequences. Like the government's involved."

"It is," Camila said, deadpan. "We're fixing your busted love lives before Halloween. Consider this an intervention."

Ravi's jaw dropped, controller clattering to the floor. "Excuse me? Busted?! My love life is... under renovation. It's a work in progress!"

"Uninhabitable," Sarah corrected, flipping through a clipboard.

Marisol held up a post-it note with hearts doodled on it in red ink. "And condemned by the county. We checked."

Bharath blinked between the girls and the board, smiling awkwardly, clearly unsure whether to be amused or concerned. "Wait. This is like... matchmaking? Arranged dating?"

Sarah nodded, completely serious. "With analytics."

Camila grinned. "And spidey-sense."

Marisol added, "And chisme... you know, the good gossip. The insider information."

Jorge raised both eyebrows, looking between his Cheeto bag and the board. "I thought we were just playing Tekken tonight. I didn't sign up for romance counseling."

"It's not for you baby. It's for the undesirables!"

"Hey!" Ravi exclaimed. "I resemble that remark."

Tyrel was grinning now, a slow smile spreading across his face as understanding dawned. "So lemme get this straight. Y'all out here settin' us up? Like, for real for real? With actual girls who know we exist?"

Ravi's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "This isn't a prank, right? Because if this ends with me dating someone who collects roadkill for science projects, I swear to God..."

Sarah slapped a paper folder into Ravi's lap with the authority of a lawyer serving legal documents.

"Ravi. Welcome to the draft. First pick starts in five minutes. You may be a nerd. But tonight? You're our nerd. And we're about to change your life."

"Boom!" Camila declared, tossing a matching folder onto Tyrel's lap like a signed contract. "Read it and weep, gentlemen."

Tyrel flipped it open, his eyes widening as he scanned the contents. "Yo. YO. This looks like an actual scouting report. Y'all wrote full bios? With stats?"

"Of course," Marisol said, offended. "We're not animals. This is a scientific process."

"You rated them in categories?" Ravi asked, holding up a laminated card like it was evidence in a trial. His voice climbed an octave. "Star sign, favorite band, dating red flags, and... bro, did you put a 'costume potential' score?! What does that even mean?!"

Camila nodded, smugly satisfied. "Melina got a 9.5. She owns leather pants and isn't afraid to wear them. That's quality costume coordination potential."

"Sweet Black Jesus," Tyrel whispered reverently, staring at a glossy photo paper-clipped to one of the profiles.

"Listen carefully," Sarah said, pacing now like a coach delivering a halftime speech. "You'll be spectators. You'll observe. You'll learn. But you do not... I repeat, do NOT... get to influence the outcome. We run this draft. We make the picks. You just show up and try not to embarrass yourselves."

Ravi stood up, indignant. "What?! That's a dictatorship! What happened to consent? Agency? The American way?!"

Tyrel put his feet up on the coffee table, hands behind his head, completely relaxed. "Man, I'm just enjoyin' the ride. Draft me a baddie and I'll thank the Lord twice on Sunday. Y'all got my full blessing."

Bharath and Jorge leaned back simultaneously, silently exchanging glances that contained entire conversations. Jorge raised his soda can like a toast, red Cheeto dust still coating his fingers. "Aquí vamos, hermanos. Here we go."

Bharath smiled wide, his usual quiet demeanor cracking into genuine amusement. "This is insane. Completely insane. But... I am thoroughly entertained. Please continue."

Sarah walked to the corner where she'd hidden her secret weapon—a projector she'd "borrowed" from the electrical engineering department, complete with a laptop and what appeared to be an actual PowerPoint presentation. She plugged it in, and the machine whirred to life.

"Let the draft begin," she announced, dimming the lights.

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

Chapter 96: The Deliberation Phase

[1,065 words]

Tyrel and Ravi now sat side-by-side on the floor like two kids about to open Pokémon booster packs, only what they held were laminated profiles, photo prints, and two mysterious folders marked "CONFIDENTIAL: TYREL BOARD" and "CONFIDENTIAL: RAVI BOARD" in Camila's loopy cursive.

"Bro," Tyrel whispered, flipping through glossy printouts. "They really went all out. This one even got a zodiac chart."

Ravi fanned his cards like trading pieces. "Yeh kya hai, bhai (what is this bro) - this girl's favorite movie is *Scream* and she owns a ferret? What does that even mean?"

"Means she *freaky*," Tyrel grinned.

Behind them, the girls stood in a line like judgmental Power Rangers.

“Alright!” Sarah clapped, stepping forward like she was hosting *TRL*. “Time for Round One of the draft. The Selection Committee has prepared twelve candidate profiles. Six potential matches for each of our eligible bachelors: Tyrel 'Can't Shut Up' Johnson and Ravi 'Mansplain' Mehta.”

“Hey!” Ravi objected.

“You literally explained gravitational potential energy to a girl in the middle of a party,” Camila shot back. “She was holding a red Solo cup and *crying*, Ravi.”

“I was being supportive!”

“She was crying because her dog died,” Marisol deadpanned.

Tyrel leaned over to Ravi. “Dawg... you gotta stop explainin’ physics at girls.”

“I thought she was a science major!”

“You gotta learn to read the *room*, macha.”

Bharath and Jorge were now seated on the couch with popcorn like they were watching *Monday Night RAW*.

Jorge nudged Bharath. “You ever seen anything like this in Chennai?”

Bharath’s voice was soft with wonder. “I have seen aunties arrange marriages... but so far nothing this... entertaining.”

Sarah clicked her mechanical pencil and raised a clipboard. “The rules are simple. The girls-meaning us-will review each of the candidates and narrow the list to two finalists per guy. Then we deliberate. Then we decide. You”-she looked at the boys-“will sit there and say nothing.”

“Can we vote?” Ravi asked.

“No,” all three girls said in unison.

“Can we trade picks?” Tyrel grinned, holding up a card with Melina’s photo. “Cause I already know who my MVP is.”

“Oh God,” Camila muttered. “You picked Melina?”

Marisol rolled her eyes. “Of course he picked Melina.”

Melina's profile photo was a *cosmopolitan fever dream*: she posed in a spaghetti-strap top, hoop earrings, and a smirk that said *I've sued my ex-boyfriend and won*. Her "Red Flag" box had three stars and a footnote that read, "*Once pepper-sprayed a guy for interrupting her during 'No Scrubs.'*"

"She got a 10 for style, an 11 for danger, and a 13 for confidence," Tyrel said reverently. "That's a *baddie*, bro. I'm tryna get *arrested*."

Ravi leaned over, frowning. "You can't *have* Melina. I short-listed her already."

Tyrel turned. "Say what?"

"She's clearly the smartest one. Law school track, debate team-bro, she could be my Hillary Clinton."

"You tryna *date* or get sued?" Tyrel barked. "Melina would eat you *alive*, Ravi. She like a hot piranha."

"She'd keep me humble."

"You'd be a *corpse*!"

Camila stepped forward and yanked Melina's folder from Tyrel's hands like a schoolteacher catching a kid with contraband. "That's it. She's the wildcard."

Sarah nodded. "Wildcard candidate Melina now becomes *draft-locked*. She cannot be claimed, only considered. That means she's a floating variable."

"Like a restricted free agent," Tyrel offered.

Marisol smirked. "Exactly. She goes to the final round-maybe. No trades. No swaps. No bribes."

"*Damn*," Tyrel muttered. "Y'all runnin' this like the *NFL draft*, huh?"

"This *is* the NFL," Camila said. "But with better fashion."

"Okay," Sarah continued, flipping pages like a news anchor. "Let's go through the Round One contenders."

TYREL'S CANDIDATES

1.
 - Red Flag: Will punch if disrespected.
 - Costume Potential™: "Janet Jackson in *Poetic Justice*" - 10/10.
2. Tonya Delmar – Visual Arts, Taurus, reads tarot.
 - Red Flag: Might hex you.

- Costume Potential™: Witchcore Queen.
- 3.
 - Red Flag: All of them.
 - Costume Potential™: Dangerously high.
- 1.
 - Red Flag: Has a frog sanctuary in her dorm.
 - Costume Potential™: Miss Frizzle meets *X-Files*.
- 2. Melina Vega – See above.
 - Red Flag: Ravi might *die*.
- 3. Priya Singh – Psych major, Gemini, fluent in sarcasm and Bollywood references.
 - Red Flag: Will psychoanalyze your mom.
 - Costume Potential™: 90s Rani Mukherjee.
- 4. Leslie Mendez – Art history, Leo.
 - Red Flag: Collects perfume samples like they're Pokémon.
 - Costume Potential™: Mona Lisa with attitude.
- 5. Meghan Roberts – Journalism major, Pisces.
 - Red Flag: Owns fifteen Trapper Keepers labeled “Chaos.”
 - Costume Potential™: Carmen Sandiego’s messy cousin.

Tyrel rubbed his hands together. “A’ight. I want LaTasha or Melina. Lock it in.”

“No,” Marisol said.

“I *request* Melina,” implored Ravi

“No.”

“Can I *petition* for Melina?” begged Tyrel

“No.”

Ravi raised a finger. “I object to being denied access to Melina. This is discrimination based on testosterone levels.”

“Ravi,” Sarah said, leaning down, “she’s on your list too.”

“So you’re saying there’s still a chance?”

Bharath snorted. “You are digging your own grave with a broken spoon, macha.”

The girls regrouped near the board.

“We will now commence the Shortlist Debate,” Sarah said.

The boys leaned forward in anticipation.

“Behind closed doors.”

The boys groaned in unison.

“You may talk amongst yourselves,” Camila said. “But remember. Your opinions are decorative.”

The girls stood shoulder-to-shoulder like news anchors ready to cover election night. Camila had a stack of Polaroids and a clipboard thick with notes. Sarah wielded a mechanical pencil like it was a sword. Marisol adjusted the projector with the slow, lethal calm of someone setting up a live dissection.

The boys-Tyrel, Ravi, Bharath, and Jorge-sat in a row on the couch with half-eaten pizza, their Tekken controllers abandoned and useless.

“You boys may speak,” Sarah announced. “But no one is listening.”

Tyrel raised his hand. “Quick question. Is this... legally binding?”

“Yes,” Camila said without looking up.

“No,” Sarah added.

“Emotionally? Definitely,” Marisol finished, smirking.

Ravi leaned toward Bharath. “Yaar, I haven’t been this nervous since my JEE exams.”

Tyrel clutched his heart. “I feel like this is The Bachelor, but we the ones gettin’ eliminated.”

The lights dimmed. The popcorn was gone. The projector whirred like a low-flying aircraft. Camila popped the cap off her purple glitter pen with a snap that echoed like a gavel.

“We now enter,” Sarah intoned, “the Deliberation Phase.”

“Black Jesus save me,” Tyrel whispered. “They got *phases*.”

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

- Chapter 97: The Shortlist

Chapter 97: The Shortlist

[1,559 words]

The girls moved like choreographed surgeons. Camila laid out profile cards like tarot. Marisol hung headshots on the whiteboard in two columns. Sarah drew boxes labeled “Potential,” “Chaotic Neutral,” and “Absolutely Not” in perfect handwriting.

“Let’s begin with Tyrel’s list,” Sarah said. “Six candidates. One winner. Possibly a restraining order.”

“We ready, chicas?” Camila asked, tapping her clipboard.

“Born ready,” Marisol said.

“Already scared,” Ravi muttered.

The overhead projector clicked on again, casting a faintly crooked light over the whiteboard. Camila fanned out Tyrel’s six candidates like tarot cards, each profile trembling under the judgment of three very opinionated women.

“Alright,” Sarah said, clicking her marker like a weapon. “We start with LaTasha.”

Tyrel sat up straighter. Ravi whispered, “Here we go, bro. She’s your MVP.”

1. *LaTasha Williams*

Photo: DJ booth, hands mid-scratch, looking like she just called someone out over the mic.

“Powerhouse,” Marisol said instantly. “Takes no crap, demands respect. Exactly what Tyrel needs.”

“She wears Timberlands to Sunday brunch,” Camila said, grinning. “That’s queen energy.”

“She once threw her gum in a guy’s Red Bull and said, ‘Now you know how I feel when men interrupt me,’” Sarah added.

Tyrel’s eyes lit up. “Y’all... she’s perfect. I will *write poetry*. I’ll stop eating Flaming Hots in bed. Just... please.”

“Plus,” Ravi chimed in, “she got that ATL bounce. She’s got *roots*. Not like these transplant girls.”

Tyrel fist-bumped him. “Respect.”

The girls looked at each other and all nodded.

Camila: “LaTasha is shortlist material. Next.”

Tyrel slumped in relief. “Oh thank you, Jesus and Lauryn Hill.”

1. Dani Cruz

Photo: Holding a blowtorch and a Bunsen burner, smirking like she knows how to destroy your GPA and your self-esteem.

“She intimidates me and I like that,” Sarah said flatly.

“She intimidates *me*,” Marisol added, and she wasn’t smiling.

“She once reorganized the ChemE tutoring schedule *and* took the top spot. By herself,” Camila said. “And she won the Spring Chili Cookoff with a vegan recipe.”

Tyrel’s mouth dropped. “Wait-she got spice *and* spreadsheets? Oh I’m in. Lock it in. Double lock it.”

“You’d cry within the first hour,” Sarah said. “She’d make you take notes on your own emotional growth.”

“I’ll *bring* the clipboard,” Tyrel declared.

Ravi whispered, “Honestly, if you don’t pick her, I might convert to ChemE.”

Tyrel snapped his fingers at him. “Back off.”

Sarah underlined Dani’s name. “Possible shortlist. But she’s high-risk. She has very low nonsense tolerance.”

“She once said, ‘I don’t date men who say ‘vibe’ as a verb,’” Camila added.

Tyrel blinked. “That’s 70% of my vocabulary.”

“You’ll adapt,” Marisol said. “Or die.”

1. Amber Riley

Photo: Mid-twirl at a party, big hoops, electric energy. Her smile? Reckless joy.

“She DJ’d the radio takeover last semester and played Aaliyah, Rage Against the Machine, and *Boyz II Men* back to back,” Sarah said. “That’s taste.”

“She writes poetry that rhymes ‘healing’ with ‘feeling’ and makes it *work*,” Camila noted.

“She also cried over a pigeon last week,” Marisol said.

Tyrel’s eyes sparkled. “Yo. That’s *soul*. That’s the kind of girl who reads your birth chart, cries during *The Lion King*, and still punches you in the arm when you get cocky.”

“She deserves peace,” Sarah said slowly. “Tyrel is... not peace.”

“I can *be* peace,” Tyrel said. “I’ll start doing yoga. Say ‘namaste’ instead of ‘nah, I’m straight.’”

“You literally just lied to a woman at the gas station and told her you were a backup dancer for Usher,” Ravi reminded him.

“Bro, I’m *versatile*.”

The girls all tilted their heads.

“She’s a maybe,” Camila said. “High empathy, low tolerance for foolishness.”

“Then what’s *she* doing on *my* board?” Tyrel asked.

“Shh! Quiet in the peanut gallery”

1. *Tiffany Banks*

Photo: Blond highlights, baby blue mini dress, peace sign fingers, chewing gum like it's a weapon.

“She once asked if Alaska was a country,” Marisol said.

“She has a beeper. A *working* beeper,” Sarah said. “That she uses.”

“She also once said Tupac was ‘that guy with the bandana who dated JLo,’” Camila added.

Tyrel threw a hand in the air. “She *fine*, though.”

“She asked the dining hall if pizza was vegan because it doesn’t ‘have animals on it,’” Sarah deadpanned.

“Y’all hatin’ on a visionary,” Tyrel muttered.

Jorge said, “Hermano. You said Bharath was a rabbit for not eating meat and that you hated vegetarians on principle.”

“Yeah. But he ain’t fine though”.

Ravi leaned over. “I’m just saying. I’d go to a party if she was there.”

Tyrel nodded. “Exactly! She’s like... that one chaotic party guest who doesn’t bring anything but leaves with everyone’s heart.”

“She also once left a guy *at* a party for stepping on her platform heels,” Camila said.

“Shortlisted?” Tyrel asked.

The girls all made faces. “She’s in the ‘Chaotic Neutral’ pile,” Marisol said, pushing her profile sideways.

Tyrel groaned. “She’s gonna haunt me forever.”

1. *Tonya Delmar*

Photo: Black dress, crystal necklace, a black cat in the background of the photo.

“She runs the Wicca club,” Sarah said.

“She *is* the Wicca club,” Camila corrected.

“She told someone in the dining hall their ‘aura smelled like fraud,’” Marisol added.

Tyrel raised a hand. “Quick question. Did she really make a voodoo doll of her ex?”

“Not a voodoo doll,” Camila said. “A ‘cord-cutting poppet.’”

Ravi muttered, “That’s worse, right?”

Tyrel leaned back. “I ain’t gonna lie. That’s hot.”

“She wears black lipstick to *breakfast*,” Marisol noted.

“Yo. That’s commitment to the brand,” Tyrel said. “I want a woman who might hex me.”

“You need therapy,” Sarah said.

“She goes in the ‘Possibly Summons Demons’ column,” Camila added, moving her card accordingly.

Tyrel sighed. “That’s the most accurate thing anyone’s said all night.”

1. *Melina Vega*

Photo: Leaning on a Mustang, sipping a Slurpee, not smiling but looking hot.

“She once took a guy’s pager, looked through his texts, handed it back, and *walked away*. Without saying a word,” Sarah said.

“She sued her roommate over cable bills and *won*,” Marisol added.

“She runs on Red Vines, espresso, and vengeance,” Camila said. “She’s terrifying.”

Tyrel stood up. “That’s the one. That’s my final boss. I want to *earn* that woman.”

Ravi held out a hand. “No. I draw the line at Melina. She’s mine.”

“You said Nandita was your soulmate.”

“And you said LaTasha was yours!”

“And Melina is my *awakening*.”

“She’s gonna ruin your GPA,” Tyrel growled.

“She’s gonna ruin *your credit score*. If you actually have one,” Ravi shot back.

The girls all turned to each other and said in perfect sync: “*Denied*.”

Melina’s photo was moved to the Wildcard Box. “She will be assigned at random if chaos calls for it,” Sarah intoned.

“Chaos calls for her *every day*,” Tyrel said reverently.

The projector clicked off. The lights came on. The air in Sarah’s living room grew thick with anticipation and Cheeto dust.

“We now enter the decision phase,” Sarah announced solemnly, flipping her clipboard closed like a judge preparing to deliver a sentence.

Tyrel straightened up, suddenly sweating. “Hold up, wait. We still talkin’ possibilities, right?”

“No, boo,” Marisol said sweetly. “We’re talkin’ *finalists*.”

Camila spun around and began erasing the whiteboard, leaving only three blank slots beneath Tyrel’s name.

“We get three?” Ravi asked, blinking. “You said two earlier.”

“Bonus slot,” Sarah said. “To honor Tyrel’s... excessive enthusiasm.”

Tyrel pointed to himself with both thumbs. “That’s right, baby. Triple threat.”

Bharath leaned over to Jorge. “What is happening?”

Jorge shrugged. “I think we’re watching a man get publicly humbled in real time.”

Ravi gave Tyrel a supportive pat. “Don’t worry, bhai. I wouldn’t hit on any of your girls. Except Melina. She’s mine.”

“Back off, Data Science Gandhi,” Tyrel muttered. “She’s already branded me emotionally.”

The girls huddled like a military tribunal, whispering and shaking their heads dramatically. Camila even pulled out a highlighter. Tyrel, watching from the couch, began mumbling to himself.

“Okay okay okay,” he said, hands steepled like a televangelist. “LaTasha gotta be in. She got that radio voice. I need that. Dani... she could teach me lab stuff. Real science. Tiffany... she’s dumb, but like, *hot-dumb*. That’s a genre.”

He looked at Ravi. “I don’t *not* want any of them.”

“You’re thirsty,” Ravi replied. “You want the whole soda fountain.”

Tyrel nodded. “I’m dehydrated, bro. I am *bone dry*.”

“And yet,” Sarah said, spinning around, “not everyone gets a trophy.”

“Damn,” Tyrel whispered.

Bharath spoke softly. “They’re about to decide your fate, macha.”

Tyrel folded his hands in prayer. “Black Jesus, Tupac, and Biggie Smalls—please guide these women.”

Camila stepped forward with a flourish, holding up a glittery envelope.

“We, the Committee for Operation Trick-or-Treat Hearts,” she said, “have selected the official shortlist for Tyrel Johnson.”

Marisol fanned herself with the discarded Ami profile. “It was not easy. So many red flags. So many red heels.”

Sarah raised the whiteboard marker and wrote the names one by one, in deliberate, theatrical silence.

LaTasha Williams

Tyrel gasped. “YESSSSS. I am seen. I am known.”

“She’s gonna slap you if you act up,” Sarah warned.

“And I *will* act up,” Tyrel replied reverently. “It’s a cycle.”

Ravi nodded. “That one’s a certified queen. No arguments.”

Danielle ‘Dani’ Cruz

“Oh Lord,” Tyrel muttered, clutching his chest. “I’m gonna start meal-prepping. I’m gonna download Duolingo for chemistry.”

“She’ll never call you back,” Marisol said flatly.

“I’ll wait,” he whispered. “I’ll wait forever.”

“She’s a Capricorn,” Camila added. “She’ll make you fix your resume on the *first date*.”

Tyrel nodded. “That’s romance.”

Melina Vega

Ravi shot up like he’d been tasered. “*WHAT?!*”

Tyrel screamed, “HOLY SWEET MOTHER OF HOT SAUCE.”

“You *both* had her on your list,” Camila said. “She had to be evaluated.”

“She’s a *wildcard*,” Ravi objected. “Not a *finalist!*”

“Wildcard status means she floats between both,” Sarah said, shrugging. “Like a hot chaos ghost.”

Ravi flailed. “You said she couldn’t be *claimed!*”

“She can’t,” Marisol said. “But she can *haunt*.”

Tyrel fell backward onto the carpet, eyes wide with ecstasy. “My time has come.”

“No! No no no!” Ravi cried. “She’s not your destiny, bro. She’s a lawsuit waiting to happen.”

“She’s my civil war,” Tyrel whispered. “And I will *lose*.”

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 98: Ravi’s Shortlist

[1,191 words]

Final Board Update:

TYREL – FINAL SHORTLIST

“We need to choose wisely,” Sarah said ominously.

“Oh, I won’t,” Tyrel replied.

“Now,” Marisol said, turning with a grin, “let’s move on to Ravi’s list.”

Ravi straightened his collar. “Okay. I am ready. Let’s be logical. Let’s be dignified.”

“You tried to flirt with a cashier at the campus bookstore by quoting Newton’s Laws,” Tyrel whispered.

Ravi glared. “They were *accurate*.”

Sarah spun her clipboard like a sword. “Alright. Our next victim-sorry, volunteer-is Ravi. Bachelor #2. Future corpse.”

Camila grinned. “Let’s see what beautiful disasters await him.”

Tyrel leaned over to Ravi, whispering, “Brace yourself, dawg. These women ‘bout to dismantle your hopes like Ikea furniture.”

“I am mentally prepared,” Ravi said, sitting cross-legged like a monk. “I have fasted. I have prayed. I have-”

“You tried to flirt with the cashier at Waffle House and called her a ‘data packet,’” Bharath reminded him.

“I have *evolved* since then.”

Marisol held up a profile sheet with tabs and sparkles. “Ravi’s matches are a special bunch. Equal parts cute, chaotic, and probably smarter than him.”

“Hey!”

Nandita Rao

Photo: Loose kurti, a ponytail scrunchie, and a Sailor Moon keychain peeking from her library badge lanyard. She’s mid-laugh, slightly blurred, like the camera was afraid to interrupt her vibe.

“She’s an Electrical Engineering freshman,” Sarah began. “Works at the campus library part-time. That’s where we met her. Super sweet.”

“Helped us find a lost psych textbook,” Marisol added. “Also gave us snacks from her bag. Who does that?”

“Bollywood fan,” Camila chimed in. “And anime. She had a *Sailor Jupiter* sticker on her water bottle.”

“She’s too pure for Ravi,” Tyrel said solemnly.

“I will watch a Hindi movie every day if that’s what it takes,” Ravi declared.

“Her vibe is girl-next-door meets tech goddess,” Sarah added. “But she’s lowkey competitive. She beat a dude at Minesweeper and said, ‘No mercy in the algorithm.’”

Ravi clutched his chest. “That’s it. That’s the one.”

“You just said that about three people,” Jorge noted.

“I am spiritually flexible,” Ravi replied.

“I think she’s adorable,” Camila said. “But maybe too quiet for someone who literally narrates his own chess moves.”

“She deserves peace,” Marisol said.

“She also deserves someone who understands transformers,” Sarah countered.

“That’s me!” Ravi shot up. “I know resistors! I cried watching *Transformers!*”

“Not a resistor,” Marisol muttered, “but noted.”

Priya Singh

Photo: Cropped top, jeans, messy braid, bindi, and a suspiciously sarcastic smirk. She’s holding a chai cup like it’s full of secrets.

“Psych major,” Camila said. “Gemini. Born to judge.”

“Fluent in sarcasm and Bollywood fight scenes,” Sarah added.

“She has a playlist titled *Songs to Psychoanalyze Your Crush To*,” Marisol said.

“She once live-read a guy’s body language and correctly guessed his ex’s star sign,” Camila continued.

“I want her to ruin me,” Ravi said too quickly.

Bharath choked on his soda. “Macha. Control!”

“She’s the type to say ‘you’re projecting’ in the middle of an argument and be right,” Sarah said.

“She will therapize your childhood,” Marisol added.

“I need closure anyway,” Ravi whispered.

“She’s too smart,” Tyrel warned. “She gon’ diagnose you before the appetizers.”

“I’ll bring her a couch,” Ravi said. “First date, IKEA trip.”

“She’s a power move,” Camila concluded. “Could either stabilize you or destroy you.”

“I welcome both,” Ravi said with stars in his eyes.

Ami Banerjee

Photo: Big glasses, nose ring, green shawl, and a backpack shaped like a frog. She’s barefoot on a patch of grass, grinning like a kid on a field trip.

“She’s studying biology,” Marisol said. “Volunteers at the botanical garden and the herpetology lab.”

“She once gave CPR to a salamander,” Sarah added.

“She is the human equivalent of herbal tea,” Camila said. “And I mean that lovingly.”

“She helped create a frog-themed zine for Earth Day,” Marisol said.

“Her dorm smells like eucalyptus and rebellion,” Sarah added.

“Too crunchy?” Camila asked.

“She calls her menstrual cup ‘Moon Commander,’” Sarah said.

Ravi tilted his head. “So she’s thoughtful... earthy... a bit unpredictable...”

“She talks to plants,” Camila said.

“So does my paati in Chennai,” Bharath muttered.

“I don’t hate this,” Ravi admitted.

“She’s chill,” Tyrel said. “You need someone chill.”

“I don’t know if I’m compostable enough for her,” Ravi said.

“She might try to detox your chakras,” Marisol noted.

“I have chakras?” Ravi blinked.

“Debatable,” Sarah replied.

Leslie Mendez

Photo: Short bob, leather jacket, smoky eye, and a book titled The Metaphysics of Doom Pop. The kind of girl who doesn’t smile, but somehow still flirts.

“Art history major,” Sarah said. “Leo. Writes reviews on cassette tape.”

“She carries five perfumes and changes them depending on who she wants to intimidate,” Camila said.

“She ghosted a guy by mailing him a postcard that just said ‘Later,’” Marisol added.

“She’s what happens when you major in vibes,” Sarah said.

“She once asked a guy what font he cried in,” Camila said.

“She has a conspiracy wall,” Marisol said.

“I think I love her,” Ravi whispered.

“She’s danger,” Sarah said. “Like, full spice rack danger.”

“She’d demand a pre-date mood board,” Camila said.

“I have a printer,” Ravi offered.

“She’d tell you she liked your *potential* and then not call for three days,” Marisol said.

“Worth it,” Ravi nodded.

“She scares me,” Tyrel said. “And I like scary women.”

Meghan Roberts

Photo: Messy bun, Discman clipped to jeans, arms crossed, notebook titled Things I’ll Never Forgive. Caught mid-side-eye.

“She’s a journalism major,” Camila said. “But not the nice kind.”

“She wrote an editorial titled *Death to Glitter Pens*,” Marisol said.

“She believes dreams are government propaganda,” Sarah deadpanned.

“She collects rejection letters,” Camila added.

“She will absolutely ghost you by quoting Sylvia Plath,” Marisol said.

“She sounds intense,” Ravi said.

“Okay, so maybe not that one,” Ravi admitted.

“She’d wreck your confidence, then gift-wrap the remains,” Camila said.

“Beautiful writing, though,” Ravi muttered.

“Absolutely not,” Sarah said. “You’d end up in her diary. As a metaphor.”

Wildcard Reminder: Melina Vega

Sarah circled the name in aggressive strokes and underlined it twice.

“She’s already haunting Tyrel’s dreams,” Camila said.

“She’s now on both boards,” Marisol added. “Floating like a beautiful time bomb.”

“She carries pepper spray in her purse and ambition in her blood,” Sarah said.

“I’d let her destroy my GPA,” Ravi said.

“Back off,” Tyrel growled.

“You can’t copyright a woman, man.”

“She’s not a startup,” Tyrel snapped. “She’s a *phenomenon*.”

Sarah stepped back from the whiteboard. “Alright. Decision time.”

Ravi leaned forward, fists clenched.

“Girls’ huddle,” Camila announced.

The three girls closed in around the clipboard, whispering, arguing, peeking at notes.

Ravi turned to Bharath. “I can’t breathe.”

“You said you were prepared,” Bharath replied.

“That was before Leslie. That was before Moon Commander. I wasn’t ready for all this nuance.”

“They’re taking too long,” Tyrel muttered.

“What if they eliminate Nandita?” Ravi whispered. “I’ll die.”

“What if they *keep* Leslie?” Jorge added. “You’ll still die.”

The girls finally broke formation.

Sarah turned to face the group.

“In the sacred spirit of petty chaos,” she said, “we present...”

She wrote them on the board.

Final Shortlist - Ravi

Nandita Rao

Priya Singh

Melina Vega (Wildcard)

Ravi gasped. "They live! My girls live!"

Tyrel exhaled. "I can't believe you got Nandita."

"She'll probably help me with circuits," Ravi said.

"Or cut your circuit if you annoy her," Sarah said.

"She deserves the best," Marisol added.

"I'm willing to *become* the best," Ravi said.

"You better," Camila said, capping her marker. "Because Club Zero's only a week away."

Bharath looked between the names and the panic on Ravi's face. "What happens now?"

"Now?" Sarah smiled. "Now we prep you clowns for your debut."

Jorge raised his soda. "To love... and potential lawsuits."

Ravi just stared at the board, mouth agape. "Melina is gonna kill me."

"And we're gonna dress you for it," Camila grinned.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 99: The Boo-chelor: Season 1 Begins

[1,895 words]

The Student Center food court at Georgia Tech was lit as brightly as a Stasi interrogation chamber designed to expose bad life choices. The unnecessarily incandescent fluorescent lights appeared to hum the depressing chorus of a Smashing Pumpkins B-side.

It was a Wednesday afternoon. The vibe should have been "napping through Calculus." The universe, however, appeared to have other, dumber plans and Sarah was its chosen agent of chaos.

To the confusion of the Chik-Fil-A employees and a few assorted customers, she exploded into the center of the linoleum like she'd been launched from a confetti cannon. Her blonde hair defied both gravity and good sense. She wore a plaid shirt tied precariously around a tiny tank top - a fashion statement that screamed, "I get my style cues from Clueless and my life advice from TRL." She slapped a plastic spork against her palm like it was a golden microphone handed to her by Carson Daly himself.

"Alright, GT! Go JACKETS!!" she yelled, her voice cracking with a power she absolutely did not earn. "You're on the air for the LIVE TAPING of ..."

She pirouetted with the grace of a startled flamingo and thrust the spork toward a piece of poster board that was clinging to the wall with the desperation of two flimsy strips of peeling duct tape.

OPERATION TRICK-OR-TREAT HEARTS: PHASE 3 – THE BOO-CHELOR

(Hosted by People Your Parents Warned You About)

"The tape is already failing!" Sarah announced to the dumbstruck employees of the fast food joints and the students milling around the food court, as if this was a feature, not a flaw. "Because this isn't MTV! This is Georgia Tech! In 1998! Nothing sticks here except regret and the smell of fry oil!"

A few boys clapped enthusiastically, not because she made any sense, but because when a beautiful girl speaks at Georgia Tech, one responds. To not do so would be a terrible omen that would cause even greater damage to the already perilous ratio at Tech.

Camila, a woman possessed by the spirit of a Hollywood auteur, lunged forward with a VHS camcorder so bulky it probably required its own gym membership. The machine whirred like a swarm of mechanical bees, greedily consuming battery power like they were Tic Tacs.

"Sarah! Mi vida! More drama!" Camila's voice was muffled, her entire face hidden behind the camera. "You are not selling it! My future grandchildren need to see this level of cringe in high definition!"

"For what history?" Ravi muttered from a nearby table, already looking like he was awaiting a sentencing. "I didn't know we were filming this!"

"For the history books, Ravi!" Camila yelled back, deadly serious. "The people of tomorrow need to know that we had the courage to be this stupid on a Wednesday!"

Jorge, her loyal sherpa, shuffled beside her, arms laden with the tools of their trade: a teetering stack of blank VHS tapes, a desk lamp they'd "borrowed" from Sarah's dorm room (its cord trailing behind him like a sad tail), and a clapperboard he'd fashioned from a Pizza Hut box.

The clapperboard read:

TAKE 1: THE BOO-CHELOR

TAKE 2: IF WE SCREW UP (PROBABLE)

TAKE 3: IF TYREL BREAKS THE FOURTH WALL... AGAIN!

Bharath sat at a high-top table, legs crossed with the serene posture of a visiting diplomat. He watched the scene unfold with wide, politely horrified eyes, as if observing a ritual he didn't understand but was too polite to question. Malls in Chennai did not have this.

"This is... certainly a production," Bharath said, choosing his words with the care of a bomb disposal expert.

"Bro," Tyrel grinned, materializing to slap him on the back with enough force to realign his spine. "This ain't a production. This is PERFORMANCE ART, son! We makin' magic!"

Tyrel, a white boy who somehow spoke exclusively in late-90s hip-hop ad-libs, was draped in a FUBU jersey and Timberlands, an outfit that declared war on both the indoor setting and good taste.

Ravi sighed, pushing his glasses up his nose. "You know, when the visa officer asked me about 'cultural adjustment,' I pictured learning to like baseball and excessively large sodas. I did not picture... this."

Bharath nodded with the deep, soulful sympathy of a man trapped on the same sinking ship. "I, too, was led to believe the American college experience involved textbooks. And perhaps some nachos."

Tyrel cackled. "Forget the books, B! We teachin' you the real core curriculum: Advanced Romance 101, Dramatic Arts 205, and Fine Dining at Chik-fil-A. It's all in the syllabus, my guy!"

"Bhai... our man literally has two gorgeous girlfriends that share him. You really think he needs to learn from us? Did you forget both Sarah and Marisol are his girlfriends?" asked Ravi with a raised eyebrow.

“That’s umm... a good point. Aight dawg, you tell us what to do,” admitted Tyrel sheepishly.

Before Bharath could formulate a response, Sarah stepped forward, the spork-mic held aloft.

“Gentlemen! Ladies! Random people just trying to enjoy their waffle fries in peace! Rejoice! For you will not be able to anymore!” she boomed. “We are gathered here today to witness destiny! Fate! Romance! And at least one potential Title IX violation! The Boo-chelor is officially in session!”

A handful of students clutching their Cokes turned to stare. Because when a beautiful blonde that looks like a Playboy Playmate in a crop top starts yelling about "destiny" next to you, you pay attention.

“Camila! Get my good side! Which is all of them!” Sarah commanded.

Camila zoomed in. And zoomed. And kept zooming until the lens was so close it could identify Sarah’s skin care routine.

“CAMILA!” Jorge hissed. “You’re in her esophagus! Back up!”

“I’m capturing the ambiance, Jorge! The raw, unflinching humanity!”

“You’re capturing her tonsils! This is a dating show, not a medical documentary!”

“Basta! Enough! Go sit with Bharath. I don’t need lessons to videotape.”

Just then, Marisol made her entrance. She didn't just walk in; she made the air itself part for her. Red lips, dark curls, and a crop top that likely violated several sections of the student code of conduct. Her hips moved with a confidence that suggested a full mariachi band was following her, just out of frame.

“Hola, mis locos,” she purred, sliding up next to Sarah like a glamorous telenovela villainess.

Ravi instantly straightened his posture so fast his vertebrae cracked. Tyrel’s soda straw clattered to the floor. Bharath just smiled a soft, goofy smile, which was his standard biological response to Marisol’s mere presence.

Marisol shot him a wink. Bharath immediately turned the color of a fire engine.

Camila tilted the camera and began whispering into it like Sir David Attenborough. “And here we observe the Tambramus shy-boyus in its natural habitat. Note the vibrant blush, a clear sign of both admiration and acute respiratory distress.”

Bharath blinked. "Camila, I am right here. I can hear you."

"Excelente! The subject is responsive!" she replied, not missing a beat. "You see what you need to be when I talk to you Jorge?"

Jorge turned to scowl at Bharath.

Sarah plowed on, a blonde force of nature. "As I was saying - our esteemed Selection Committee, comprised of me and my flawless co-host Marisol and gorgeous camerawoman Camila, have chosen the finest bachelorettes on campus! And today, our two brave, questionably-qualified bachelors will meet them! On this very cheap linoleum floor!"

Jorge leaned into the frame. "Actually, it's commercial-grade vinyl composite tile ... "

"Jorge, I will end you," Sarah hissed, without dropping her game-show-host smile.

There was a subtle buzz as people around the Chick-Fil-A started to get into the show. The threat from Sarah seemed to pull in people looking for free entertainment.

She then gestured to the center of the court as if unveiling a new Ferrari. "And now... put your hands together for the stars of our show! The men of the hour! The reason we're all here instead of studying! YOUR BOO-CHELORS!"

Tyrel launched himself from his chair as if ejected. "YEEEEAH BOY! BIG TYRELLLLL, IN THE FLESH! MAKE SOME NOISE FOR THE GOOD GUY, Y'ALL!"

A few bewildered freshmen offered a smattering of applause. Ravi tried to melt into the floor.

"I don't want to do this," Ravi whispered to Bharath, panic in his eyes. "This is more stressful than my CS quizzes."

"Just smile, macha," Bharath offered gently. "And for the love of all that is holy, do not bring up thermodynamics."

"I would NEVER mention thermodynamics on a date!" Ravi snapped, offended.

"Bro, you explained Bernoulli's principle to a girl who was crying over Titanic," Tyrel reminded him.

"SHE WAS HOLDING A SLUSHIE! I THOUGHT SHE WAS UPSET ABOUT FLUID DYNAMICS BECAUSE SHE COULDN'T GET THE LAST BIT OF SLUSHIE!"

Before the scientific debate could continue, Sarah yanked Ravi to his feet by his elbow.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Bachelor Number One: Ravi ‘The Delhi Danger’ Mehta! His hobbies include overthinking and correcting people’s grammar!”

More confused applause as Ravi gave a shy wave.

“And Bachelor Number Two: Tyrel ‘Can’t Be Tamed’ Johnson! His hobbies include announcing his own entrances and referring to himself in the third person!”

Tyrel took a deep, theatrical bow. “Thank you, thank you. I’d like to thank my mom, my barber, and the good Lord for making me this fabulous.”

Bharath interjected, “Don’t you cut your own hair?”

“Exactly. Have you seen such a fresh style anywhere, son?”

Jorge buried his face in the pizza-box clapperboard. “He’s going to get us all kicked out of school, isn’t he?”

Camila zoomed in on his despair. “This is the content we’re here for, amor. This is gold.”

Bharath sat perfectly still in the cyclone of idiocy, hands folded in his lap, projecting the serene, supportive energy of a monk watching his disciples set a car on fire.

Sarah flung her arms wide. “Today, these two heroes will embark on a quest - a journey - a semi-structured social experiment - to find love, passion, and someone who won’t mind being seen with them in public on Halloween!”

Marisol leaned into the ‘mic’. “So, basically, a miracle.”

Tyrel nodded, his face suddenly grave. “The struggle is real. We out here hustlin’.”

Ravi looked pleadingly at Bharath. “If this ends with my face on a viral VHS tape looking like a complete ... ”

Bharath patted his arm. “My friend, I believe that ship has already sailed, set itself on fire, and sung a Backstreet Boys song on its way down.”

“AND NOW,” Sarah yelled, lifting the spork to the heavens like it was the infant Simba, “THE MOMENT YOU’VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR! CUE THE BACHELOR THEME MUSIC!”

Marisol, with a dramatic flourish, hit play on her boombox.

Instead of a soulful Boyz II Men ballad, the aggressive, guitar-shredding Tekken 3 menu theme CRASHED through the food court.

A table of sophomores leaped to their feet, pumping their fists. “YEEESSS! HEIHACHI MISHIMA!”

Tyrel immediately broke into a series of inexplicable fight-move karate chops. “AYOOOOO! THIS THE JAM! EYYYYY! WU-TANG!”

Ravi clamped his hands over his ears. “THIS ISN'T ROMANTIC! THIS IS WHAT PEOPLE LISTEN TO BEFORE THEY PUNCH A BEAR!”

Camila shrugged, “Boyz II men issued a proactive Cease and Desist order on the use of their songs. So we had to improvise.”

With a glare to silence the peanut gallery and the errant contestant (Tyrel), Sarah screamed over the digital carnage: “WELCOME TO PHASE THREE! OUR BACHELORS ARE TERRIFIED! OUR COMMITTEE IS UNQUALIFIED! AND CAMILA IS ILLEGALLY RECORDING THIS FOR POSTERITY!”

“FOR THE CHILDREN!” Camila bellowed back.

Jorge, with a final, desperate sigh, snapped the pizza box shut.

CLAP!

“SCENE ONE! TAKE ONE! FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, LET’S GET THIS OVER WITH!”

And so, with the subtlety of a brick through a window, the Boo-chelor had begun.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 100: Enter: The Potential Dates

[1,799 words]

Sarah twirled her plastic spoon-microphone with the kind of dramatic flair usually reserved for a Broadway death scene. The fluorescent lights gleamed off its cheap plastic for the queen of this linoleum court.

“Ladies! Gentlemen! Students of Georgia Tech and any stray faculty members who are definitely not here to shut us down!” her voice boomed, ricocheting off the ugly, mustard-colored tiles that had seen more spilled soda than a movie theater floor.

“Prepare your hearts, your minds, and your gastric juices! You are about to witness the unveiling of our bachelorettes - a dazzling coven of beautiful, dangerous, academically-overqualified queens...”

Marisol leaned into the frame, her voice dropping to a sultry, movie-trailer baritone that could sell perfume to a nun. “...ready to fight for love, for glory, and for the fundamental, God-given right to not have to date these two specific clowns.”

Tyrel beat his chest with a hollow thump, his FUBU jersey absorbing the blow. “Y’ALL HEAR THAT? WE MAIN CHARACTERS TODAY! PROTAGONIST ENERGY! TAKE THAT BHARATH! WE THE MCS TODAY, SON!”

“Hey!” protested Bharath, “I’m here to support you guys.”

“Sorry bro. I got overenthusiastic. We cool?”

“Yea.”

Ravi pushed his glasses so far up his nose they nearly fused with his eyebrows. “I feel like I’m about to be publicly ranked on a complex algorithm combining national GDP, my mother’s disappointment, and my ability to maintain eye contact for more than three seconds.”

From the designated “Commentary & Moral Support” table, Bharath watched the proceedings with the serene, politely confused air of a tourist at a riot. He pressed his palms together as if in prayer. “This seems... very exciting.”

Jorge, who was now also in charge of a “mood lamp” (the stolen desk lamp from the library pointed at the ceiling), muttered, “‘Exciting’ is one word for it. ‘Actionable’ is another. ‘A clear violation of campus fire codes’ is a third.”

Camila, her face still buried in the camcorder, zoomed in on his stressed-out pores. “Shut up, Jorge, we’re making art! This is our Citizen Kane, if Citizen Kane was about two dorks trying to get a date for Halloween!”

Sarah ignored them, taking a deep, theatrical breath. “LET THE PROCESSION... BEGIN!”

A hush fell over the food court. Or, at least, the Chick-fil-A fryers seemed to quiet down out of respect.

ENTRANT #1 - LaTasha “DJ Thunder” Williams

The hallway lights didn't just flicker; they strobed with the epileptic intensity of a mid-90s rave, as Marisol found the light switches to toggle. She managed to miraculously sync the toggling with the phantom beat of a Missy Elliott track that only she could hear.

Then - BOOM - LaTasha emerged. She didn't walk. She processed. Her swagger was so potent it had its own gravitational pull, threatening to suck stray napkins into her orbit. Her braids were intricate works of architectural genius, her hoop earrings were large enough to serve as emergency life preservers, and her custom-cropped WRECK RADIO shirt was a masterpiece of textile rebellion. She moved across the linoleum as if the floor itself should be grateful for the contact.

Tyrel's jaw unhinged. He shot to his feet, his chair screeching backward like a dying animal. "BLACK JESUS! HAVE MERCY, IT'S A VISION! IT'S AN ANGEL SENT FROM THE ATL! IT'S ..."

LaTasha snapped her fingers once. The sound was as sharp and final as a gunshot. Tyrel's vocal cords severed mid-holler. He sat down so hard his teeth rattled.

"You Tyrel?" she asked, her voice a blend of Atlanta honey and implicit threat. It was the vocal equivalent of a sweet tea that someone had spiked with napalm.

Tyrel, now a mere mortal, nodded frantically. "Yes ma'am. Big Ty. They call me Big ... "

"Quiet," she commanded, not raising her voice a single decibel.

Tyrel's mouth sealed shut with an audible click. Ravi, watching this display of raw power, let out a tiny, involuntary yelp.

A smattering of applause erupted from a table of mechanical engineers. LaTasha acknowledged them with a slow, regal nod, the kind a queen gives to peasants from a safe, non-interactive distance.

She glided to the "contestant bench" (a row of connected plastic chairs), crossed her legs, and scanned the room. Her gaze wasn't just assessing; it was categorizing, filing everyone away into mental folders labeled "Potential," "Background Character," and "Lunch."

Camila, trembling with reverence, whispered into her camera, "Observe. The alpha female in her natural habitat. Note the flawless posture, the unblinking gaze. She hasn't even spoken a full sentence and has already established dominance over seventy percent of the room."

ENTRANT #2 - Dani "Lab Goddess" Cruz

If LaTasha floated, Dani marched. She stormed into the food court with the aggressive, purposeful stride of someone late for a patent filing. She wore cargo pants with more pockets than secrets, a lab coat worn as a cape of authority, and a pair of safety goggles pushed up on her forehead like a crown of practicality. Clutched to her chest was a five-subject notebook so thick it could probably stop a bullet.

She stopped dead center in the staging area, her eyes doing a quick, unimpressed scan of Sarah, the spoon, the poster board, and the hyperventilating Tyrel. Her face contorted into a mask of pure, unadulterated skepticism.

“What the hell is this?” she deadpanned, her voice flat as a failed experiment.

Sarah’s hostess smile remained, though it now looked a bit strained. “Welcome to The Boo-chelor, Dani! A journey of the heart!”

“Camila told me someone needed urgent tutoring,” Dani stated, holding up her notebook. “She said it was a ‘crisis of academic proportions.’ I have a polymer science lab in ninety-eight minutes. This does not look like a crisis. This looks like a waste of my calibrated time.”

From behind the camera, Camila yelled, “It’s EMOTIONAL tutoring! For love! Your heart is the lab now, Dani! Your heart!”

Dani sighed a sigh that carried the weight of a thousand all-nighters. “Whatever. I’m timing this.” She pulled a digital stopwatch from one of her many pockets, clicked it, and sat down with spine-straightening military precision.

She immediately flipped open her notebook and began scribbling, her first observation presumably being: Subject A (Hostess): Delusional. Prone to theatrics. Weapon: plastic cutlery.

Ravi leaned toward Tyrel, whispering, “She looks like she grades people’s life choices.”

Tyrel, still recovering from LaTasha’s shutdown, nodded slowly. “She could grade me. I’d get an F-minus. But I’d frame the paper and hang it on my wall.”

ENTRANT #3 - Priya “The Human MRI” Singh

Priya’s entrance was less of a walk and more of an atmospheric shift. She seemed to materialize from the lingering scent of grease and desperation, holding a steaming cup of chai like a sacred talisman. Her messy braid was a work of artful chaos, her black crop top was a statement, and her flip-flops slapped the floor with a rhythm that said, I know things you don’t, and I’m mildly amused by your ignorance.

She paused directly between the bachelor table and the contestant bench, her dark, insightful eyes performing a full diagnostic scan on Ravi and Tyrel. It felt less like being looked at and more like being dissected by a benevolent but brutally honest psychic.

“You two look nervous,” she stated, a small, knowing smile playing on her lips. It wasn’t a question.

Ravi's brain short-circuited. "I - no - yes - I mean, my baseline is a state of low-grade panic, so this is actually quite normal ... "

Priya cut him off with a gentle wave of her chai hand. "You're sitting like someone who thinks they're going to lose." She then swiveled her gaze to Tyrel. "And you're sitting like someone who thinks they've already won."

Tyrel threw his arms wide, his ego reinflating in a nanosecond. "HELL YEAH I AM! THAT'S CALLED CONFIDENCE, BABY! IT'S THE TYREL WAY ... "

Priya raised a single, perfectly sculpted eyebrow. It was a weapon. "And that," she said softly, "is exactly why you won't."

The peanut gallery - a growing collection of students who had abandoned their textbooks for this live-action soap opera - erupted in a collective, "OOOOHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Tyrel clutched his FUBU jersey over his heart, staggering back as if physically wounded. "She came for my SOUL! Right in the chest cavity! Doc, I think I'm in love!"

"Hey!" protested Ravi. "She's my date. Hit on your own girls, bhai!"

Priya simply smirked, took a serene sip of her chai, and sashayed to the bench, planting herself squarely between the intimidating LaTasha and the scribbling Dani. An instant, terrifying power trio had been formed.

ENTRANT #4 - Nandita "Cinnamon Roll with a 4.0 GPA" Rao

At first, there was nothing. Just the faint sound of hyperventilation from the hallway. Then, a single, trembling hand appeared, gripping the doorframe as if for dear life. Next, the very top of a head, followed by the reflective glint of a pair of oversized glasses. Finally, Nandita shuffled into view, a fawn who had been thrust onto a NASCAR track.

Dressed in a soft, powder-blue kurta over jeans and a backpack so large it probably contained a full camping set, she looked like she'd gotten lost on her way to the library's silent study floor. She clutched a stack of color-coded index cards to her chest like a spiritual shield.

She offered a tiny, fluttering wave to the entire room. "H-hello. Um. I - I wasn't... explicitly told... it would be so... public?" Her voice was a whisper, a gentle plea for mercy.

Marisol's stern hostess facade melted. She blew a kiss across the room. "You're perfect, querida. You are the calm in our storm. Ignore the chaos."

Tyrel leaned toward Ravi, his voice full of awe. “She precious. Like a baby panda. She cute too.”

Ravi nodded in solemn agreement. “She looks like she apologizes to the vending machine when it doesn’t have the snack she wants.”

Nandita, with the slow, careful steps of a bomb disposal expert, finally made it to the bench. She sat on the very edge, looking as out of place as a calculator at a poetry slam. LaTasha gave her a sidelong glance that could curdle milk. Dani made a note in her book, probably: Subject D: Low threat. High cortisol levels. Priya just smiled her enigmatic smile, as if knowing exactly how this would end for the poor girl.

The air crackled with unspoken competition. It was a thirsty, chaotic energy.

And then... the lights died.

Not a flicker. A full, dramatic power cut that plunged the food court into a tomb-like silence and darkness for a solid three seconds before they sputtered back to life with an angry buzz.

Jorge dropped his pizza-box clapperboard. “That’s not a sign. That’s a warning from God himself. We’ve angered the patron saint of student affairs.”

Camila, however, was in her element. She zoomed in on the flickering hallway entrance, her voice dropping to a frantic, Blair Witch whisper. “Something’s coming. The air is changing. The very fabric of reality is thinning in the Chick-fil-A sector. What ancient being have we summoned?”

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