

The Matchmaker

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1. Mahi

September, Thursday, 29th

"Mahi Chandra," Mr. Patwardhan called my name, prompting me to stand in my seat.

Everybody else in the class stared at me, as if I was the movie going to be played.

"Mahi, your marks don't seem to have improved over time. What is all this? Only 20 in Physics? And you've even messed up a lot in biology. Maybe your family has a secret basement full of gold that would fulfill the college fees. Heck, you won't even get into a private college with these marks. Sit down, now," I followed his command.

It didn't matter whatever my skin complexion was, because the only shade it showed was red. Like, why the fuck did he have to announce it to the whole class? I agreed with my bad performance in the test, but there could've been a one-on-one session. I could already notice some of my classmates grinning at the remarks.

"I want your parents to be here this weekend," he continued before moving onto the next target.

"Srikanya Sivakumar. You've the highest score in the class. That's good, but don't get on cloud nine. This is only amongst these 40 something kids... there's still a whole country waiting to compete with you. I want higher than this next time."

"Yes sir," she replied, and took a seat.

I slightly bent forward, enough to whisper into her ear, "Even if you get the 1st rank in the whole of the world, he'll say that there are still aliens for you to beat."

She gave a slight chuckle, trying to stifle it with her hand.

She replied, "I don't even pay attention to him anymore. It's a routine now. Study, give tests and get defamed. I can even state what he'll say to a particular person. Look, it's Vru's turn now. He'll say, 'you were far better last year, but now, boys and all'..."

"You were far better last year, Vrushali. But now, this hanging out with boys and all... you too better bring your parents this weekend," Mr. Patwardhan recited.

At last, when he left the room, SK made a 180 degree turn to face me.

"Bro, just because she's got a couple male friends automatically labels her as a slut in Patwardhan's eyes. Tomorrow, if he sees me just pat a guy on the shoulder, he'll dial my home and tell them I was having sex."

I burst into laughter and hi-fived the equally cackling SK and Aruna. When I turned to do the same to Varun, my bench partner, he suddenly acted reluctant.

"No, dude!! Didn't you hear her? No touching boys, or you're getting pregnant," he mocked, drawing himself further away.

This caused us 3 to laugh even more, and he finally high-fived each of us. When it was my turn, he intentionally retracted his hand again to trick me. But when he gave that smile, and lifted my hand to force the gesture, I had butterflies in my guts. His standing up signaled me that he wanted to get out.

"No, no, be seated. You don't need to get up to give me side," he immediately insisted, and instead jumped across the backrest.

As he walked away with his bag, I didn't even realize I was staring at him until Aruna slapped me in the back of my head.

"Stop it, or your eyes will roll out," she uttered as she set herself on top of my desk from the front seat.

"Shut up..." I was about to properly get back at her, until I overheard my name.

"Mahi and Aruna are like the dumb sidekicks to SK," a boy was saying to his friends as they exited the class.

The other 2 noticed my distress.

"C'mon, Mahi, don't pay attention to that stuff. People will blabber all kinds of bullshit," SK tried to persuade.

"Yeah, dude, fuck them. Now let's celebrate the end of Mr. Patwardhan's critical announcements!! Where should we go?" Aruna cheered.

"Ah, you just need an excuse to go out," SK remarked.

"Aww, please!!!" she made those puppy eyes and babyish face that looked too cute to refuse.

"Okay, okay... fine," SK agreed, chuckling.

"What about you, Meh?"

"Aruna, you know me. My mom won't allow it..."

"Oh come on, Meh, loosen up a little!! It will be just a few minutes, and you can tell your mom that there was mad traffic, or Mr Patwardhan took a few extra minutes."

"Dude..." but before I could continue, she continued to ramble.

"Your mom is also against boys, but you do still have a huge crush on..."

Before she could speak the name, I threw my hand over her mouth.

"Okay, okay, fine. Jeez, Aruna, turn down that volume of yours a little."

Finally concurring, we got up and left the room. As we were on our way crossing the corridor, Mr. Patwardhan didn't seem to be content with us yet.

"See the kids from batch B. Their class average is 30% more than yours. Their topper, Amyra has got 702 marks!! I think I need to set some extra classes..." he muttered as he walked away and everybody groaned.

That was out of 720 for the record. So this was how it went about everyday in Prabodhan Coaching Center. Literally meaning 'enlightenment'.

For the ones who are not familiar with Indian coaching centers, let me give you a quick intro. Coaching Centers are nothing but basically cram schools, exclusive to the entrance exams for engineering, medical or commerce. They could be considered as an alternative form of 'high schools' for certain students, because they usually had their own associated formal colleges that only needed to be attended once a week for practicals and attendance purposes of the board exams.

After we had exited the building, the noisy cluster of guys at the gate's corner caught my eyes as usual. Many of them were cocky brats, but a handful of them were flamboyant and attractive, like Varun. He was followed by Kartikeya and Satbeer, both of whom I wasn't fond of due to their own reasons. And in the middle of the flock stood their leader, Vedraj. In the shortest description, he was an egotistical asshole who thought he owned the center and whatever he walked into.

My heart began jumping as soon as Varun waved me a good-bye. I just couldn't resist the urge to invite him, but there were a whole lot of vultures around, who would also swoop in at the mention of girls outing. As a result, I simply made him a short gesture. He excused himself out of the cluster and skipped towards me, skipping my beats as well.

"Wassup?" he addressed in a flirtatious way that made all 3 of us flush.

"Nothing, we were just deciding to hit the Momo Joint, and I wanted to know if you'd like to com..."

"You and going out? Why the hell would I miss such an auspicious moment? Let's go!!"

Yeah, I was kinda infamous around for being a homebody, all thanks to my overprotective mother, who believed that I would get kidnapped if I tried to go to the shop across the house. But whatever, I was grateful that I at least got the opportunity to commute on my own unlike many people here. Despite it being heavily well documented. I've always blamed this character of hers on my father's death. She had been a single mother looking after 2 teenage daughters since.

We soon were a couple meters away, enough that the chaos of the gangs was absent. All that was present now was honking of vehicles, some occasional cries of random people, giggles of me, Aruna and SK and Varun's mimicry. He was better than any comedian. No, it's not because of my infatuation, trust me, he really was!!

"And then she's like 'yess, yess, verryyy goood... one star for you'. Like bruh, we are 17 now, not in kindergarten," he remarked over our botany teacher.

"Stop it, she's nice!! Okay, we're here now. Everybody, tell your wishes," I declared as we stood next to Momo Joint.

"My all time favorite, paneer tandoori momos as always!" SK chimed.

"Yeah, I'll go with it too. It's Tuesday today and I don't eat non-veg," Aruna added.

"Ah, seriously? But I was craving chicken peri peri momos so much!" Varun whined.

"Don't worry, they both can share the veg ones while we take the chicken," I offered, which quickly revived him.

So we took a seat at a vacant table and awaited our order. After the gossip walk, everyone was now busy in their mobiles. Except me, because I had sufficient amount of phone time the rest of the day (at home). Therefore, I began thinking of an icebreaker.

I was already so obsessed with knowing Varun's likes, that I decided to go for it.

"Hey, what's everybody's ideal type?"

Everyone suddenly looked out of their mobiles as if I had pressed their balls.

"My... Ideal type?" SK uttered. "Well... It's... I don't know... Someone like..."

"Like Navneet?" Aruna interrupted.

"Of course not, dude, stop it!! He was a fucking mistake..."

"And you still dream of making that mistake again!!" Aruna continued.

"Oh, fuck you!! You don't even have a type, you just grab a guy, toy with him and throw him after done."

"That's right, babe. I'm a self-confessed playgirl. Because I just know that there's never going to be a guy enough to match my standard..."

"Okay, here she goes again, the narcissistic queen," I snickered.

We let her blabber a little to mock her, but quickly put an end to it before it went out of hand.

"What about you, chocolate boy?" I turned to Varun.

"Me? I am into like... more mature girls. She should be independent and not petty. She shouldn't at all be that 'waiting for the prince' type of girl or possessive."

"Wow, that's deep. Nice conditions," I smiled.

Actually, on the inside, I was the exact opposite, because I knew that I was mostly everything that Varun didn't want in his girlfriend.

"Okay, okay, enough about others... You now reveal about yours, Mahi."

I almost choked on my momo as I heard him say that.

"I... Uhm..." whatever I was about to say was either way going to be seen as 'waiting for the prince', so I had to contemplate for a clever answer.

"I just want someone who truly understands me and loves me the way I am," I finally spat.

None of the others seemed to be satisfied, and before they could protest, someone else called me.

"Mahi!!" I easily recognized my younger sister's croak.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Kavya, what's with you on being on my tail all the time?! Are you going to tell on me this time too?"

"Quit it, Mahi! I'm not an idiot like you to do that," she defended.

"Ohh, we all know who has done what."

"Just leave that for now... Haven't you informed anything to mom? She's been calling me since our classes ended, and I had no idea where you were!!"

"So you did rat me out, didn't you?!"

"No, you dummy!! As I said, I had no idea where you were... Outside, inside, on the way, no idea!! Why don't you just fucking reply to her yourselves!"

It then suddenly hit me; why hadn't I been alerted of mom's calls and messages on my mobile? Had I been that high on Varun's vibes?

But then I just realized that my phone itself was missing.

"Crap!! I think I forgot my mobile at the center!" I shrieked.

Everybody started giving me an earful, but I dismissed them all (except Varun), and hurried back to the center. As it was late either way, I bid them goodbye. I crossed paths with some familiar faces, quickly notifying them of my situation before heading away. Finally, when I reached the center, no student was around anymore. Only some of the staff and workers.

"What are you doing here?" the guard asked me.

"I forgot my phone inside. Can I quickly get it back?"

"Okay, go get it fast," I sped away after his permission.

Then there came a few more familiar faces of staff, whom I had to explain in short. I know it sounds so repetitive and frustrating, but that's how it happened in my life. At last, I located my classroom, and rushed to my bench to pick up my phone.

'8 missed calls from Mom'.

'Why aren't you picking up?' 'Hello?' 'Mahi, beta, is the class over?' 'Are you on the bus yet?' my mother's messages appeared in a reverse chronological order.

Fumbling the mobile with the tension of my fate, I dialed my mother's number.

"Where the hell have you been, Mahi??! I have called you so many times!! How dare you ignore my calls!!" she already began yelling.

"Mom, I know, I'm sorry. I had got into the bus until halfway I realized that I forgot my phone at the center. So I had to get off and come back walking," I came up with something pretty believable.

"Oh god, Mahi, how careless you are!! You might well enough forget anything else, but not your phone!! And why didn't you just tell it to Kavya, or use her phone?"

"Mom, you know we have different friend circles and we don't usually keep waiting for each other."

"What nonsense? She's your sister, you both live in the same house. How can you not both wait for each other... Ugh, fine, we'll deal with this later. For now, just come home quickly... Don't stay hanging around there, everyone must've left."

Oh yeah, right, our center was on the side of a forest, where once classes ended, the only things left were darkness and solitude. If you didn't get it, it was sarcasm; we lived in Pune, a densely populated metropolis. And it wasn't even night time by the way, our classes ended at 2 in the noon.

"Fine, mom, I'm coming," I hung up.

The day was just getting worse. My mom's scolding, and Varun's different standards. His gaze alone told me that it wasn't me who came into his mind while talking about his ideal type. I was hella possessive, and I expected my boyfriend to always make me feel special. And understand my childish behavior, and support me in my life.

Life is just always like this. Never what you expect it to be. To be fair, life wouldn't have a point if we didn't always live trying to shape it to our desires. But whatever, I wasn't in the philosophical mood, and I just wanted to quickly go home and get over with mom's scolding.

So just as I was about to exit the classroom, I was startled by someone standing in the doorway. A guy was inclined to the frame, with gray cargo pants and a dull green T-shirt with some design, a combination that I found weird. He was playing with a coin in between his fingers.

"I didn't realize that there was someone else here other than me," I spoke.

He suddenly stood upright, and looked towards me. His face was... solemn. Not ugly, not attractive, just solemn. His hair was swept to the side, but it still hung partly over his forehead. It gave him a mysterious vibe for some reason.

"Are you one of those kids who stay at the last to get in discussions with the teachers in peace?"

The guy chuckled, "Maybe, if I felt like it. What about you? Seems like you've had a rough day."

"Oh yeah, I got to go urgently. Bye," I set out to exit the classroom.

"Your face tells me that you are disappointed. Over a crush," his words suddenly made me stop in the tracks.

"What?" I gagged.

"A crush. You like someone who's out of your reach, don't you?"

He was now sounding creepy.

"Whatever, what's it to you?"

"I can help you get him."

I burst into a guffaw.

"You? Who the hell even are you? I haven't ever even seen you around. And you think that you're so capable of making a popular guy like me?"

He smirked, "The name's 'MM'. It actually stands for Mandar Mandlekar, but people just call me the Matchmaker."

2. Mahi

September, Thursday, 29th

"The Matchmaker? Seriously? I have never ever heard it in my entire time over here. Now quit bothering me," I paced ahead.

But he was persistent. He started walking with my speed to keep up with me. That coin in his hand was still gliding in between his fingers.

"You've been late already, and either way your mom is going to reprimand you. Then why does it matter if it is a couple minutes more?"

I was startled at his psychic personality, but it later occurred to me that he might just have overheard my call. So I decided to ignore him and go on my way.

"Okay, so you are in doubt of my capabilities. What if I prove it to you?"

"Then do prove it," I said casually, wanting him to just leave me alone.

"Fine. How about Mr. Patwardhan then? If he makes an apology tomorrow? No wait, it still sounds pretty general... what if he makes a 'specific' apology to you?"

"Huh... Mr. Patwardhan and apologize to me? Maybe at my funeral or something," I dismissed, also wondering how he knew about Mr. Patwardhan's act.

I could definitely say that he wasn't in my batch, but then again, Mr. Patwardhan was not exactly the quietest of all people. We had now reached outside the gates.

"Done then. Just wait till tomorrow morning, and you'll be surprised. Until then, goodbye," he suddenly cut.

He let the coin between his fingers fall free in the air for a moment, before quickly enclosing it back in his palm. I stared at him in curiosity as he walked in the opposite direction, but shook my head and set to the bus stop.

The moment I opened the door to my apartment, I was jumpscared by my mother glaring at me like a statue from the Disneyland horror house.

"Welcome home, Your Majesty," she taunted.

"How many times have I told you to at least message me before leaving. Can't you do this single task right?"

"I'm sorry mom... It won't happen next time."

"It better not. You know what Mrs. Devrath told me the other day? A teenage girl was assaulted in the middle of a market in broad daylight. The people around were literally recording the incident, but not one stepped up to help."

Ah, something had to be done of this nosy Mrs. Devrath.

"Yeah, mom, I understand, I'll take care."

"Okay, enough of that now. I want to hear your test results."

I gulped, "Uhh... they are going to display it tomorrow."

She then said nothing, just stood there with crossed arms with the grumpiest face I had ever seen in my whole life. And trust me, it was scarier than the Nun. It just automatically made me open up.

"It's 101 in chemistry, 97 in botany, 115 in zoology and 30 in physics. Total..."

"343. I can't believe it Mahi, how many more times do I have to remind you about the reality? I thought that you were serious when you said you wanted to become a doctor. But what is all this? Do you even study or, is there another boy?"

"Mom, please!!" I threw my hands. "There's no boy, I promise, it was just one time!! I do study!"

"When? I don't see you studying?"

"You're working..."

"Oh, please, we used to do that in our childhood. Have you even rechecked your test paper to see what questions you attempted wrong or left blank?"

"No..."

"Good then, you've got yourself a task. Give me your mobile, there's no reason for you to have it till you do that."

"Mom!! You can't just take it!"

"Oh, I can. Give it here," she snatched it from my hand. "You are no prime minister to receive important calls. Besides, you forget it either way, so it mustn't be that essential."

I had no option now but to surrender to her.

"You remember Sneha, my cousin's daughter?"

I gave a nod regardless.

"She failed her exam, so her parents married her off at just 18. But don't worry, I won't do that to you."

"Yay..."

"I'll marry you off at 21, because that's the legal age now."

"Mom!!"

She gave a chuckle, before regaining her strictness.

"Oh, and where is that other devil? Kavya!! Come here fast!"

I wondered what else was due with Kavya. She came strutting out of her room, looking first at mom and then me with a questioning look.

"What is it?"

"Hand me your phone."

"What!? Why?"

"It's just till evening. I want your sister to sincerely study, so I don't want to risk her using your phone."

"That's nonsense, why would I let her use my phone?!"

"Kavya... I told you to give your phone."

Kavya looked like a bomb about to explode whining, but she contained herself somehow. After handing over her mobile, she gave me a death glare before heading into her room. Our room. We weren't aristocrats.

I too soon followed her in, anticipating the upcoming clash. And sure enough, when the door closed behind me and mom wasn't nearby anymore, Kavya erupted.

"Why the hell do you have to always have fun? Can't you study properly? It's your 12th grade!!"

"Or what? You're gonna tattletale me out again? Fine, go on, report my deeds to mother..."

"You stop that now, will you? It was just one time that I did and for your own good!!"

Okay, so this was the time for 'that' issue to come to light again. I don't think I'd need to separately explain about it to you.

"Who the fuck do you think you are to decide my good and bad?" I snapped.

"I'm your sister!! If not me then who'll..."

"You don't understand shit, okay?"

"Stop treating me like a fucking child, I'm only a year younger than you!! You were completely mad in that boy's love that you didn't get his toxic nature!"

"I knew that, okay!! I just needed a little time to put it all together, and do it my own way. But due to your controlling nature, you decided to take the matter into your own hands and report it to mom!!"

I still remembered that day. It was really a nightmare. My mom usually didn't hit me, but she did on that day. Since, she had become hypervigilant towards my behavior, especially any interactions with boys.

"Little time? Mahi, it had been months, okay? Do you have any idea how it was for me to see you foolishly drown in that boy's toxicity for several months? He even literally used you in his personal brawls... Do you even get how dangerous it could've gotten?"

The blood was now boiling the hell out of my veins, "Shut the fuck up you bitch!!"

"How dare you call me that!!" she gave me a push.

So one push led to another, one hit to the other, and we were a tangled mess in no time. Finally, we paused as we saw mother standing in the doorway, with a rolling pin in her hands.

xxxxxx

That day, the stress had caused me to get a little more sleep than usual, consequently making me late for my classes. And the bus timings just add to the complications.

Once I entered the class, I hastily hurried to my usual bench until I noticed that there were already some people sitting. Suddenly, my ears caught Varun's voice like a rabbit.

"Hey, Mahi, over here!!" he was seated at the front.

I went to him, and noticed that SK was also sitting behind him, albeit with Vrushali and Kshitija.

"What's with the seats today? Why are we in the front?" I asked as I placed down my bag.

"Yesterday's complaints stirred everybody, prompting them to change their spots and partners to avoid getting further yelled at. So everybody just moved back and now only the front benches are free," Varun told.

"Fuck. But where will now Aruna sit?" I asked, looking at SK.

"Uhh... We'll look at that when she comes. We'll manage something," she answered.

Speak of the devil. Aruna squeaked like a squirrel so loudly that the entire class' attention was on her. Which she wanted I presumed.

"What happened to our seats!! Where am I supposed to sit!" she cried as she approached us.

"Shift inside, we'll do triple," she added, which immediately tensed me up.

Because I didn't want to be triple seating with Varun. I tried to signal her with my eyes and lipsing, which she thankfully seemed to understand.

"Why don't you sit with... Lalit here?" I pointed to the empty seat with the guy in front of us.

"Him?" she exclaimed, causing him to look at us.

"I don't mind as long as you don't disturb me," he uttered.

You could say in a sense that he was a nerd. But then again, I didn't believe in human personalities that simple to be stereotyped. He was a studious guy, and hardly engaged in conversations with anyone. To be frank, I thought him to be boring.

I understood why Aruna was making faces at me due to this reason, but I made pleading eyes, which finally seemed to convince her. She plopped her bag on the floor and jumped into the bench.

"Hey," she said to Lalit, to which he just nodded and resumed reading his notes.

I could see the annoyance evident on her face. Anyways, I turned to Varun to flow into our conversations. I was determined to try to shape my personality like he wanted. But when I looked at him, he seemed disturbed.

"Hey, everything fine?" I asked him.

"Oh, yeah... It's nothing."

"Dude, you know you can share things with me right?"

He took a sigh, and seemed to be convinced.

"It's just... My marks. They aren't enough."

"You got 505... A lot better than mine. And I know that your parents are always very cool with it."

"It's not about my parents... Just leave it."

"C'mon, just free yourself!"

"It's not enough, for AIIMS. I want to get into AIIMS at any cost."

Those who are wondering, AIIMS is one of the best government colleges all over India. They have seriously low fees, resulting in extremely high cut offs. As high as 90% and above.

"AIIMS? Why AIIMS? Your dad is a surgeon, right? And he says that there's no trouble with the fees and he has connections in many private colleges."

"You aren't getting it, Mahi. It's not always about money. It just has been my dream since long, my life goal. I don't care if the studying stresses me out, but I want to get into AIIMS by hook or by crook. AIIMS is like my destiny, and nothing has the power to sway one from their destiny's path."

"Bro, I know you must be thinking that AIIMS is regarded as one hell of a great college, but trust me. I have seen and heard a lot about the inside of private colleges, and they are just or even posher than it. Why are you opting for the difficult route when you already have the shortcut? If I had a life like yours, I would have bunked classes as much as I attended..."

"Stop it, Mahi. I told you that you wouldn't get it. All you are is nonchalant and just finding a way out. You don't want to take risks or strain yourselves because you just don't have any passion. Have you even opted for the science stream because you desired it or due to someone else?"

To be honest, I took it for my ex-boyfriend, and didn't consider changing even after our abrupt breakup, but whatever, it wasn't the point. The point was that this was the first time that something like this had happened between me and Varun. He hadn't ever talked to me in that way before and it hurt me so much. I did want to apologize, but the shock just forced me to stay quiet.

Even he didn't seem to care about it much, and simply resumed reading his notes. A few of the nearby students were staring towards us, which made me open my mobile and stare at it downwards.

My heart was completely shattered. If Varun thought about me in that way, and believed that 'I wouldn't get it', how were we supposed to be in a relationship? I had already started to ruminate on how I was so inferior and useless, and how Varun would easily choose any other girl over me. Probably that Priyanka, Minal or even SK.

But before I could zone out into my imaginary world, I was snapped back to reality by Mr. Patwardhan's voice.

"Good Morning, students. Please sit and take out your 3rd package. Oh, and before we start the lecture, I have an important announcement to make. Mahi Chandra, can you please stand up?"

I was so shocked. Mr. Patwardhan calling me out suddenly like that definitely meant that something was wrong. Maybe he had seen me eat momos out? But we all four were present, then why just me? I honestly couldn't guess it, and wasn't even in the state of confronting it because of my earlier trauma. So there I stood, ready to take the insults.

"Uhh... Listen, I would like to apologize to you for my behavior yesterday. I went a little overboard in scolding you, bringing your family in between and all. So I'm sorry. But I still insist that you need to seriously improve yourselves. And it would be truly helpful for your own progress if you bring your parents this weekend. Okay?"

I gave him a nod, and took my seat as he went back into his book. What had I just witnessed? Everyone around was equally surprised, and gossiping so much that it sounded like a poultry farm. When Mr. Patwardhan was ready to teach, he shut everyone up and began drawing on the blackboard.

But I wasn't focussing on it. My mind had been totally blown away by his behavior. It literally felt like someone had worn his skin like a suit and stolen his identity. Because that wasn't at all how he acted, not even if he was in the best of his moods. The nicest thing he had done till date was hitting Yashraj with a chalk instead of slapping him for joking about his mustache.

What was up today? My gaze suddenly went towards Varun, who seemed to be staring at me. He quickly turned his head when I caught him.

It was at that moment that I remembered about the guy yesterday. MM something he had said... The Matchmaker? He did promise that he would make Mr. Patwardhan apologize to me in particular, and that wasn't something to be that easy to be a coincidence. Heck, that wasn't even something that would happen even if the world ended!!

How in the hell had he managed to do that? I just couldn't understand. Was he a magician? Did he have some sort of dark art? Some unknown technology? I had grown a lot inquisitive, and now I wanted to find out about it anyhow. But then I realized that he never told me where to find him.

I didn't at all remember what Mr. Patwardhan was teaching that day, because all my head was doing was creating theories about that guy's secret. Once the lecture ended and it was recess, I first of all asked my own friends if they knew about him.

"Mandar Mandlekar? Matchmaker? Nah, never heard of any such person in here," SK answered.

"Bro, if there was a 'matchmaker' in our center, I would be the first one to know about him because I have the highest requirement. Besides, why are you looking for a 'matchmaker', when you've got Aruna?" she started with the boasting.

"Come here, I'll explain to you in detail about all the awesome techniques which will make Varun think only about you. It's Lusty 101 with Aruna..."

Why was I then still single if it had been more than a year being friends with both of them?

"Okay, some other time Aruna. I've got some work," I excused myself.

I was continuously looking around for that guy, for his weird look had been stamped in my mind. But there was just no trace of him anywhere. No one seemed to have heard anything about him.

As I was sitting on a ledge panting, someone came to me, swirling a coin in their hand.

"Looking for me?"

3. Aruna

September, Friday, 30th

I had been chatting with that cute guy so long that I had completely lost track of my time. As a result, I had to paddle my bicycle with all my force to not be late to the class. Not to mention the fucking uphill slope that stood just outside my home.

Once I had arrived at my destination, I had bathed for the second time; in sweat. When I entered the corridor, I was relieved to know that there still were some students lingering around, signifying that the classes hadn't yet started. I passed by Vedraj, Satbeer, Irfan, Umesh, and many others, most of whom I had already flinged with. Wardha and her group also gave me a wave as they proceeded in their class.

Ah, there were only a couple, nerdy people that I wasn't in contact with, which wasn't even useful either way. Nobody noticed whether they stayed present or absent. That's why one must have a certain presence, a social circle, and a whole lot of friends. When I had reached my own batch, I quickly took out my phone and began to record a Snap of it.

Only when I noticed the condition present inside, I gave a loud cry. My place had gone missing!!

"What happened to our seats!! Where am I supposed to sit!" I asked, treading to my friends who had now somehow shifted up front.

SK was sitting with Vrushali and Kshitija, giving me the apologetic look saying no more could be accommodated. So the only people that remained were Mahi and Varun.

"Shift inside, we'll do triple," I stated, hoping that she would skid inside.

Yet Mahi didn't budge, and rather started making faces at me. At first, I was utterly puzzled at her actions and was about to lash out due to my already weary state. But once my gaze revisited Varun, it all suddenly clicked to me and I finally concluded to give the 2 lovebirds some space. I was then on my way searching for some other friendly faces which might've taken me in, until Mahi decided to add.

"Why don't you sit with... Lalit here?" she pointed to the empty seat right ahead of her.

A tall, skinny guy with a bunch of freckles sat sticking to the wall. His hideous bag beside him seemed to be overstuffed with God knew what, and I had no clue where the notes he was reading were supposed to fit in later.

"Him?" I exclaimed instinctively, catching his attention.

"I don't mind as long as you don't disturb me," he replied in a monotonous tone, as if not even knowing who was about to sit there.

Boys and girls all around begged me to sit beside them, but this chap here. I looked at Mahi once again, who was showing me the same puppy eyes I did the previous day, which only seemed fair. And as I was already so exhausted, I refrained from making further efforts of finding better partners and just took the seat.

"Hey," I said to Lalit, flipping my hair to the side as a habit.

He just fucking nodded at me and went back to his reading!! How the hell had he dared to do so? No boy had ever resisted the chance to talk to me. So I gave him the taste of his own medicine... I simply turned away and started chatting with Maitreyi and Pranav around, not that it mattered to him much.

Our conversation soon came around a funny trending reel from our center, so I was scrolling my mobile to find and show it. Just when, Lalit abruptly nudged me, making me groan.

"What?!"

"Mr. Patwardhan," he whispered before going back to his thing.

I was alerted in time, and quickly locked my phone to focus on our ringmaster.

"Good Morning, students. Please sit and take out your 3rd package. Oh, and before we start the lecture, I have an important announcement to make. Mahi Chandra, can you please stand up?"

Oops... Looked like Mahi had a little more coming. Though I wondered why.

"Uhh... Listen, I would like to apologize to you for my behavior yesterday. I went a little overboard in scolding you, bringing your family in between and all. So I'm sorry. But I still insist that you need to seriously improve yourselves. And it would be truly helpful for your own progress if you bring your parents this weekend. Okay?"

Everybody in there gasped, and turned to look at Mahi, except Lalit. After everyone dwindled into their own chatters, I conveyed my surprise.

"I guess he's drunk or something..." I managed to say to Mahi when Mr. Patwardhan had already begun teaching.

I had no clue which part from which chapter was going on, therefore leading me to mindlessly flip my pages in search of the match. Suddenly, Lalit's hand came in between, and turned the pages to Bohr's Magneton from Magnetism.

"Please do ask me about these things rather than making the annoying page flutter sound," he remarked.

He was such a nuisance!! I couldn't bear it anymore... I really wanted to shift elsewhere. But I wasn't sure how drunk-Patwardhan would react if I did that in the middle of his lecture. So I decided to tolerate it till the remaining hour, just when Lalit decided to be nosy again.

"That's not how you do that," he put his pen in my notebook to point at my supposedly inaccurate answer.

"Listen, what's your problem? Why are you so irritating?" I finally blurted out.

"Me? You are the one who's been nonsensically scribbling for quite a time!! Can't you get one simple question right?"

"Whatever. If I do a simple question wrong or even the whole NEET paper, it's none of your business!"

"Hey, Miss Queen!!" Mr. Patvardhan interrupted.

I gulped down my further comments as he approached us.

"In the midst of a heavy discussion, huh? Let's see what you have done in the book. What the hell is this? I just now told you that magnetic flux inside a closed surface is always zero... Then why're you recalculating the whole of it?"

Learn something from Lalit. I say, you better sit with him today onwards. He's smart and not all chatty like your friends."

"Oh, no, no, sir!! I can't sit with him!" it just swam out of my mouth.

"Why? Because he wouldn't entertain you? Are we here to have entertainment??"

"No, no... It's... he's a boy, and that makes me a bit uncomfortable..."

At this, Mr. Patvardhan gave a laugh, "What nonsense, Aruna? I've seen you hang and sit with more boys than I could count. If you're just so uncomfortable, Lalit is the last boy you should avoid."

So here I was, stuck. The remaining lecture left me completely hazed and I leapt at the voice of the bell ringing. I quickly got up from my place and filled the temporary vacancy that resulted from Varun's departure. A vibe told me that the couple's mood didn't seem too great.

When me and SK exchanged glances and decided to question her, Mahi began a wholly different topic.

"Bro, if there was a 'matchmaker' in our center, I would be the first one to know about him because I have the highest requirement. Besides, why are you looking for a 'matchmaker', when you've got Aruna?"

Come here, I'll explain to you in detail about all the awesome techniques which will make Varun think only about you. It's Lusty 101 with Aruna..."

"Okay, some other time Aruna. I've got some work," Mahi fled.

"I think they've been in a fight or something," I pointed out.

"Yeah, but what's with Lusty 101? Has that ever really worked?"

"What do you mean? It always does!! Why do you think everybody knows me around here?"

"Everybody here knows you because you tried to kiss Pranav in the classroom during the second week after 11th began."

"It wasn't deliberate, okay!! I genuinely thought no one would see! There were very few people around..."

"Oh yeah, sure, sure. But I doubt Mahi wants just a 'fling' with Varun. So you better keep your 'becoming the center of attention' strategy to yourself. That only attracts equally horny guys."

"Oh please!! This is the reality, SK, grow up!! There are only horny people out there, each of them trying to satisfy their own needs. Why do you think Navneet dumped you??"

"He... He didn't dump me!! It was mutual, okay?! And we were together for at least 3 years... What is the longest you've been in a relationship? 3 days? I don't get how that doesn't bore you..."

"Ngh... Enough with the nagging now SK, I've been subject to it too many times today already. I need to put something in my tummy."

So I got up and headed towards the measly canteen in our center's corner. It only sold those snacks that were adequate to keep a student from fainting in a lecture. Taking my 12₹, the cook returned me a samosa with a ketchup packet.

As I was about to take a seat on a ledge and feast, some guys surrounded me. Vedraj slid his arm over one of my shoulders, while Umesh on the other.

"Yo, Aru, what are you up to? Samosa and all... all alone?" Vedraj uttered.

"Shut up, Raj, I'm already tired, so let me eat in peace," I retorted.

"Yea, that's what we are saying. You eat one piece, and we eat the others. Let's all eat in pieces!!" Umesh tried to make a horrible joke.

I already knew that it was no use once they decided to gang up, but my somewhat protesting led for the Samosa base to be saved for me. To be precise, there was only a little covering remaining, while the stuffing covered the covering itself.

"C'mon, Aru, did you forget the day I gave you a lift on my bike?" Vedraj spoke as he and his gang took the leave.

I cursed back in reply, only to return facing my leftover snack. The covering was exactly the part that I savored, while I picked out the spicy potato stuffing. So just as routinely, I was about to discard my leftovers, until someone snatched it yet again.

"What's up with you now? Does everybody just keep seeing my food to satisfy their cravings?" I cried as Lalit munched onto the remainder.

To my surprise, he handed me another plate with a fully intact Samosa.

"Eat this... I wasn't hungry enough to eat the whole."

I stared at him in suspicion for a moment, because we weren't at all that close to be sharing food. Honestly, Vedraj and Umesh were more familiar to me than him at the moment. Nevertheless, I accepted the meal and muttered to him a quick thanks.

He didn't even reply and just walked away chewing my old food. What a nerd.

xxxxxx

Later, we had our chemistry lecture, but the teacher was being unexpectedly late. Varun had taken advantage of this and slipped into the backbencher boys gang, gossiping about some sports.

Their appealing atmosphere was prompting me to do something similar. Hence, I jumped around at once and made an announcement.

"Who's up for 2 truths 1 lie?"

Mahi's mood was now suddenly all cheered up, and she was the first one to join up. SK, Kshitija and Vrushali agreed soon enough.

"Hey, he looks lonely. Ask him too," SK suggested, looking at Lalit.

"He? Oh, he doesn't play. He's probably revising tomorrow's lectures. And what truths and lies would he possibly have to spice the game up?" I mocked.

"It's yesterday's," Lalit replied. "And I do have my own life secrets!"

"No, please. I don't want to guess which one is a lie from 'I accidentally cheated in a test' and 'the teacher called my parents'."

I knew he probably wasn't that simple, but it was fun seeing him crack up.

"Okay, wait. How about this? Guess which one of these is a lie. 1. I have stolen someone's mobile phone, 2. I have been on 2 dates and 3. I can drive."

The aura had now suddenly changed, and everyone seemed interested in knowing Lalit's truths.

"The dates one is definitely the lie. You, and dating? Like cmon!!" I answered, to which Lalit simply shook his head.

Now it started to seem nonsensical... How the hell had a nerdy Lalit been on 2 dates?

"The mobile phone then, obviously!" Mahi tried.

"Wrong. It's neither of them," he revealed.

"So, you can't drive?" Kshitija concluded.

Like, seriously? That was all she could infer?

"Yep. I hope this was enough to 'spice' your game up," Lalit added, before he turned back to his notes.

"Wait, but why did you steal someone's mobile?" I asked.

"The game is only for guessing the truths... not explaining them."

"Oh, come on!! If you tell me this, I won't call you a nerd anymore!"

"Whatever, I don't care what you call me either way."

In frustration, I turned to plead to the others to make him spit up.

"Let's keep playing... maybe something will turn up," SK whispered.

"Okay, now, me!! Guess what's the lie? 1. I'm going to watch Oppenheimer 2. There has..."

"It's the first one obviously!! Do you even fucking know what is Christopher Nolan?" I yelled at Vrushali.

"Aww!! That's not fair, I wasn't done!! By the way, is it a place?"

SK ignored her and added, "Now, I go. 1. I've had more than 2 breakups. 2. I did not choose to become a doctor and 3. I haven't had a crush since a year."

"I only know about one of your ex-boyfriends," Mahi replied. "I think I remember you talking something about not becoming a doctor... so I guess that rules out."

Suddenly, Lalit gave a chuckle.

"SK, and not wanting to be a doctor? That would be the worst lie I'd ever heard in this game."

"And why do you think so?" Kshitija raised a brow.

"She's one of the toppers of our class!! And have you ever looked at her dedication? Only thousands of times must have I heard our chemistry sir giving her example of 'setting the goal'."

"But then when did you have another relationship besides Navneet? SK, you're such a secretive bitch!!"

"No, I haven't been in any other relationship than with Navneet!!" she defended.

"Then how have you broken up 2 times?" I queried.

"Why do you need to have 2 relationships for 2 break ups? Can't it just happen in one?" Lalit explained, as if the sage of the Prabodhan Coaching Center.

"How do you know so much about dating and relationships huh?? Aren't you just a nerd?" I tried prying him up.

"Relationships are just bullshit. What you should really focus on is your education and career. It is nothing but just a distraction. I'm sure SK agrees."

SK was now quiet, and just nodded her head yes.

"Once you get the right job, your money will dictate your relationships and whole life. Right now, everyone is just immature and doesn't understand what it is to fall in love."

"So do you?"

"What?"

"Do you understand then? Because if not, then why are you lecturing all this..."

"Yes, I do!! I've had the experience! A couple years ago, I was just as curious as you. Running around a girl and pampering all her needs. Until one day, I realised that all she wanted were the

marks for her fucking report card. The moral is that one should learn and get wise as soon as possible. Because if not, then someone else who gets wiser first will trample you over. Everyone is behind only one thing here, and that is money and money alone."

Damn, that was deep. Now I was convinced that Lalit wasn't just the typical nerd that I mistook him for. Before I could continue, the chemistry teacher finally decided to make an appearance.

This Lalit was really an interesting specimen. He wasn't like the other guys that I was friends with. He was different. I wanted him.

4. Kartikeya

September, Friday, 30th

The hectic lecture of zoology had just been over. Or should I say 1st lecture. Because another zoology lecture was due right after this one. As usual, guys from all the other classes were arriving in ours for our usual recess gathering.

I didn't know if it was my paranoia, but I felt that maybe due to my comparatively short stature, other lads were used to pushing me to the back. Or maybe it was just the way regardless, I couldn't tell.

"Hey, Ved, you know those boys from Sopan Classes? They've been misbehaving lately," Irfan stated to Vedraj, although meaning for everyone to hear.

Vedraj was sitting on the desk in the middle, with Umesh on one of his side and Satbeer further next to him. I tried to wiggle my way to one of my best friends, and threw my arm around Satbeer's to stabilize.

"Yeah, I've heard it frequently. They've been often encountered hooting at us. Their recent success in JEE seems to have sent them to the clouds, but they need to be reminded who's the real boss here. If any of you ever encounter any of them again, you'll let the others know."

"Of course! They are all just fucking studious geeks who can't even cuss properly. If I get my hands on one of them by chan..."

The discussions went on, but I noticed that one of my other friends wasn't there.

"Hey, where is Varun?" I murmured to Satbeer.

"Huh? Oh, he's not here. Must be around, don't worry... He'll come when he wishes."

I gave him a fair nod, but the discussion around was now getting a little boring. And none of them seemed too vary of my presence anyways.

"Let's just go and check on him," I tried to lure Satbeer with me.

"Why is your dick so restless? If you want to go, you go... I want to listen to this topic," he was stubborn.

Well, I was stubborn too, so I excused myself out of the gathering. That paranoia feeling hit me again when the thought occurred to me that maybe no one noticed me because of my stature. Nevertheless, I gazed around to look for Varun.

Instead, I came across an entranced Amyra staring at the boys from her seat.

"What's up with your mind?" I startled her.

"Huh?! Ahh, nothing... I was just listening to what was going on. It seemed interesting."

"Since when were you interested in street brawls?"

"Street brawls? That's what they're talking about?!"

"Obviously! What did you think? Are you a lot into guys lately? Amyra, you're a good girl!! Don't let yourself astray for God's sake!!"

She was red like a tomato in an instant.

"Shut up!! It's nothing like that, I am not interested in boys and all!! Shush, now don't disturb me, I want to go and ask doubts."

"Yeah, that's what I'm talking. You are the topper of this center, and those boys are not even worthy enough to be dated. At least infatuate yourself with those batch C boys."

"What's up with your preparations?" Amyra suddenly questioned me.

"My preparations... Fuck. I didn't even realize there was a test coming before you mentioned it. Thanks," I winked at her playfully and walked ahead.

She was a really sweet and simple girl. I hadn't even ever heard her call someone stupid. And she always wore traditional dresses and her face literally shouted 'I'm a bookworm'.

Well, she herself told me one day that her parents were high school teachers themselves, so this seemed rather likely.

While I was exiting the classroom, I abruptly received a smack on the back of my head. I turned in anger to react, but all the guys were almost twice my size.

"C'mon, fucker, quit it," I just exclaimed.

"Haha, you're funny, shorty," Nischay continued to ridicule before walking away.

My fist clenched there for a second, before I reminded myself once again that all this was a common practice in boys circles. Making a mess out of this was only going to get me outcasted and probably more beaten up than I was at first.

Thankfully, I noticed Varun mindlessly pacing around in the corridor. I immediately ran up to him and began dragging him to the classroom. He did come inside, but insisted to stay apart from the gang.

"Hey, what's wrong with you? Why are you so off today?"

"The usual thing, dude. I'm fucked. I don't think I'm getting in AIIMS."

I let out a sigh, "This again. Bro, how many times have I told you to just believe in yourselves?"

"I do, I do I swear. But still, my score isn't climbing up."

"Bruh, you're seriously pessimistic. I have watched your scores all along and they have improved. Now what do you expect? You aren't going to get at rank 1 directly next time!! Progress is slow dude. Should I remind you of my marks again? I've barely crossed 300 yet."

"I don't man, I'm scared. Sanika was saying that she's coming this weekend. I don't want to give her a loser impression."

Guys and their crushes.

"Dude, you won't. You're already mature enough. You know what? All you are is tensed. You need to lighten up a little. Let's just all go on a boys outing. Besides, it's the perfect timing now that there aren't any tests shortly. Come,"

I finally pulled Varun by the wrist into the gang stationed at the center.

"Hey, guys, my bro here is all down. Let's all hit the cyber cafe!! We'll play counter-strike," I announced.

No one replied anything. Everyone just gave me a weird stare, before completely ignoring me and engaging in their own dialogues.

"Broo, Varun, what's up?" Irfan asked him. "Who the fuck made my bro like this?"

"It's nothing dude... Just the marks and shit."

"Marks?" Vedraj snorted. "Don't you worry about that even a bit!! As long as I'm there, you'll always be ahead of someone."

Few of the guys gave a laugh at this, which seemed purely irrational.

"Let's all go somewhere to lighten the mood. How about Vasantrao Cyber Cafe?! A tournament for counter-strike... Winner gets the food of his choice," Umesh suggested.

"Nice idea. Just take it slow till the lecture ends," Vedraj finally confirmed.

I was convinced now that they were overlooking me because of my stature. But whatever, there wasn't anything to be done. Besides, the desired result had been attained, then why would it matter?

xxxxxx

"Cover me, cover me!!" Satbeer cried.

"I'm there, I'm there. You proceed to defuse the bomb!" I followed.

"The bomb has been diffused," the computer voice sounded.

"Yeah!!" my team cheered out.

Varun's mood now seemed totally uplifted. He was jeering at the opposing team.

"Whoa, relax everyone, this wasn't supposed to be a team match. It's a tournament, and we are evaluating individual scores," Vedraj reminded.

"Okay, then let's see. Who the hell has managed to fuck everyone?" Satbeer remarked.

"And it's... Kartikeya," Irfan noted.

I erupted into a warcry, high fiving Varun and Satbeer. However, I did notice that there weren't as many shouts as expected. Everybody piled out their cash and I had soon adequate money to buy myself a couple chicken wings.

People had already started to leave, and by the time we were done eating at the nearby restaurant, there were only a handful of us left. What the fuck was their deal? Couldn't they bear one of their friends winning?

"Hey, man, I'll get going now, it's too late. Good job, Kartik bro, you're a champ," Vedraj also took off.

Now, it were only the three of us. Exactly the people I wanted the most.

"So, what's the mood?" Satbeer questioned, emphasizing on Varun.

"The mood" is great now. Thanks guys for being there."

"Say thanks to this little guy. He's the one who came up with this," Satbeer patted on my back.

"Your dick's the little guy. I'm the smart guy," I replied as we all burst into laughter.

Suddenly, Satbeer received a call, "Oh, yes dada. Yeah, we are just at the landmark."

"Who was it?"

"The driver. He's nearby. Guess I'll need to go too. How are you two leaving?"

"The bus as usual," Varun stated.

"But isn't Kartik's house the other way? Let's do one thing, I'll give you a lift on this side till the nearest bus stop."

"No problem, less fare for me. If I'm presuming that you won't charge me."

"Of course not. Oops, he's here. C'mon, let's go," Satbeer waved at a black Jaguar that swerved towards the curb.

Satbeer opened the door, and climbed inside, motioning me to do the same. I quickly muttered goodbye to Varun, and excitedly rushed into the Jaguar.

"Sir, who's this?" a voice came from the front.

"Dada, he's just a friend. His stop is on the way so I've decided to give him a lift."

A white suited driver turned himself around, and began eyeing me out weirdly.

"But sir, I've strict instructions not to take strangers inside."

"Dada, he's not a stranger, he's my best friend. Please stop making a fuss... It's just a matter of a few minutes."

I had now started feeling very odd. I was almost thinking of willingly exiting, when the driver resumed.

"He is a good friend?" he suddenly uttered.

"Yes, of course. Just drop him off at the Karve Bus Stop."

The driver hummed, "Close the door and sit carefully."

The Jaguar then began moving. I examined my outfit, and regretted the fact that maybe I could've worn something a little better. I hadn't met Satbeer's family a lot, but I knew that they were rich. His father was a wealthy politician, and Satbeer had sometimes pointed out his picture on the hoardings outside.

Meanwhile, where was I? Well, let's just say not anywhere close to a politician or politically backed background. Although, Satbeer never seemed to have any issue about this.

My usual paranoia led me to occasionally check on the driver, whom I found to be doing just the same with me. Guess people did really judge a lot more than I thought them to. The remainder of our ride was filled with our usual chats and jokes.

Suddenly, at a point, we were crossing a very vividly lit area. Probably some couples restaurant with a lucrative offer or something. Instinctively, my hand touched Satbeer's, who quickly dragged it away.

"Yeah?" he thought I wanted to say something.

"Oh, nothing, just... Wanted to say your car's really nice. I like it. The interior and all."

Just then, the car came to a halt, and I had reached my destination.

"You'll go from here, right?" Satbeer queried.

"Yeah, of course. Thanks for the ride. Bye!" I waved to him.

The driver had for some reason also exited. As I paced away, I caught a glimpse of him trying to dust the seat where I had sit. What a fucking asshole. He himself wasn't anywhere close to Satbeer's family status-wise, and yet he was acting like one. As I was waiting at the bus stop, I caught someone calling my name.

"Kartikeya?"

"Yes?" I looked towards the source.

A guy with a weird fringe hairstyle stood beside me. He was wearing a white T-shirt with some design and light brown trousers. He gave eerie vibes. And most importantly, he was impulsively playing a coin in his right hand.

"You go to Prabodhan?" I asked, noticing his bag with the logo.

"Surely, the same branch as yours."

"Strange, haven't seen you before. What's the matter?"

"That's what I should ask you."

"Huh? You were the one who called me."

"No, my friend," he suddenly stepped closer and put his arm around my neck. "You called me."

I shrugged his arm off, "Hey, quit the riddles. Just speak it out straight."

"The name's MM. It stands for Mandar Mandlekar, but people just call me the Matchmaker."

"Matchmaker'? Ok, whatever, what's it to me?"

"You, know, I can make matches with any person that you desire. With your crush..."

"What the... Where are you going with this? No thanks, I don't have any crush, and even if I had, I wouldn't certainly need your help to woo her."

"I never said it was a 'her'."

That sentence sent chills down my spine. My hair were all standing erect.

"What?"

"Listen here, Kartikeya. It doesn't matter to me what or who your crush is. A girl, a woman, a guy, a teacher, a kid, multiple people, whatever. I can help you get anyone of them."

He was making me fucking uncomfortable.

"You, motherfucker, you better stop your mouth now. Or else..."

But before I could continue, the hustle notified me that my bus had arrived. I decided to neglect him and rush into the bus before it was overcrowded. After I climbed in, I had to stand cramped between 2 obese uncles.

The ticket was bought, and the bus was now in motion. When I gazed outside, I saw the MM guy still standing on the same spot, weirdly gliding the coin back and forth his fingers. He continued to stare right into my eyes all the while till he became too little to be seen.

xxxxxxx

A few days had passed. I leapt at the right moment to avoid getting hit by the tumbler. My father was seriously raging.

"Do you have any fucking idea how much sweat and blood it took me to pay your fees? And all you're doing is fucking computer games!!" he yelled.

My mother put herself in the middle to stop the shit from escalating.

"Please stop, he has already agreed to study well since yesterday," she tried to console.

"He better do. Because I don't have it any abundance to keep us sustained for years. Both of it, money and strength. I have worked all my life just to save money and make my son study and become someone I or my father could never be. But this bastard!!! I want you to get a fucking 400 in that next paper. Understand?"

I nodded silently.

"Understand or not!!"

"Yes, yes, I understand. I'm going to study harder, I promise."

His anger now seemed to finally soothe down. He picked up his traveler keys, and sped out the door. Whatever you do, however old you grow, parents will always be scary.

As I left for my class, I could see my father's traveler leaving too. Yeah, we were a bit in a fix. As I said, we weren't politicians. Maybe, I had to struggle a little more than my other colleagues.

But the real shock had yet to come. When I reached the class, my eyes immediately stopped on Vedraj and his new girl. This damn playboy. Yet when I turned my eyes to his consort, they were just left wide open.

It was none other than Amyra!! The topper, the simple, shy girl!! How the fuck that girl had managed to catch Vedraj's heart?? This was all unbelievable. Vedraj was a total playboy, who only looked out for the best girls. And Amyra was neither hot nor popular. Well, at least not in the social way.

I knew it better to not interrupt them, so I waited for the right moment. When it was recess, both of them were back to their respective groups. Or rather, group, because Amyra was a loner. Taking the opportunity, I crawled up to her.

"Hey, hey Amyra. What the fuck is all this? Is it true that you and Vedraj are dating?!"

As expected, she turned completely red.

"Amyra?"

"Yes... We're now a thing," she spoke as low as an ant.

"But, how? How did you pull this off?"

She just continued to giggle and blush.

"Stop it, Amyra, just reveal it out. How did you do it? There's in no way I'd believe that you managed to attract Vedraj on your own."

"Actually, there's this someone who helped me."

"Who?"

"I don't quite remember his name, but he said people call him the Matchmaker."

5. Mahi

September, Friday, 30th

"Yes, yes I was looking for you. Mandar, right?"

"Yes technically... But maybe just call me MM?"

"Okay, whatever, yes, MM. But please tell me. How did you do that? How did you make Mr. Patvardhan apologize to me? Do you know magic or something? Are you an ancient sage with some dark art?"

To this, MM just laughed. He stopped gliding his coin and enclosed it shut in his palm.

"Mahi, there's no such thing like magic. Magic is merely the science that one fails to understand. In our language, we call it a trick. And as you might've heard, a magician never reveals their tricks. The only answer that I can give you is regarding the effects and not the procedure."

"That wasn't a trick, for fuck's sake. You manipulated a fully grown man. I've never seen a magician do that."

"The point, Mahi, the point. We are not here to talk how certain things are plausible or not. Do you want to be matched with your crush or not?"

"Oh, yes, yes, I want. Varun. You know Varun?"

"I know everything and everyone. And I can match you with him. Okay, let's elaborate a little on this deal," he took a seat beside.

"First of all, what I'm going to do isn't going to change the target's personality, will or behavior as a whole. The only difference will be that the target will start paying you more attention and prioritize you over other things."

"What's the target?"

"Target. The desired person. Varun," he clarified.

"So he's just going to begin noticing me more? Is that it? But then would he love me or not?"

"Attention is love my friend. Trust me, everything would gradually fall into place."

I was excited and practically squealed, before suddenly remembering an important detail.

"But why are you doing all this? You surely must be wanting something in return."

"That I of course do. Nothing is free in this world."

"How much is it? I'm afraid that I don't have a lot of money..."

"Oh please, keep your money. I'm not interested in such insignificant objects. What I want from you is something worth more."

The words got me, and I abruptly became self conscious, sliding a little away from him.

"Don't worry, it's nothing like what you're thinking of. I'm content in my celibacy."

"Then what is it that you want?"

"Time."

"What?"

"I want your time. 60 minutes per 7 days. No less, no more. Doesn't matter if it is in 1 go, or in parts. But by the end of the 7 days, I should be getting my 60 minutes. Every week till the target is to be worked upon."

He was mystical and all, but he also seemed shady.

"60 minutes for what?"

"That I can't explain to you right now. But I assure you it isn't anything perilous."

60 minutes in exchange for the apple of my eye. Did sound a reasonable deal.

"But before you agree, let me mention all the conditions," MM interjected.

"First of all, no backing off. Once the deal is done, there is no way out. The deal goes on till the termination criteria are met. The termination criteria include demise of the target or progression of the target in a paralyzed or vegetative state. The 60 minutes must be given to me before the end of the 7 day period, not a second later. And there is obviously no need for any additional time to be spent, 60 minutes are pretty sufficient. The place and time are irrelevant; you message me the details and I will be there and then. And the final and the most important, any incomppliance or an attempt at forced disruption of this deal or violence against me will be considered as a breach. Failure to abide by any of these points will result in their respective consequences, so I've to be certain that you are in your sound mind before accepting this."

It was honestly a lot to register. And eerily shady. I didn't feel like I was being matchmade. It rather felt like making an underworld contract. But I did really want Varun to like me. And frankly, though it seemed odd, there wasn't anything worrying as of yet.

"Okay, I'm in," I responded.

MM's face suddenly changed. In a moment, it clicked into a more upbeat and active face, and he got up. Then, he used his smooth finger movements to toss the coin in between into the air. When it was back at the similar height, he engulfed it into his palm as quick as lightning, and opened it back just as quick.

Gone. The coin was now nowhere to be seen.

"Done, Ms. Mahi Chandra. The effect will need a day to be seen in practice, so you'll need to excuse me for now," saying, he got up and put his hand out expecting something.

"Your mobile, please. I need to put in my number. You can text me to come to any place at any time for my 60 minutes, and I will be there shortly."

I immediately fumbled in my pockets, and unlocked my mobile before passing it to him. He typed something really fast, and a new contact by the name of 'The Matchmaker' was now in my list. After filling it in, MM began to walk away and soon disappeared into the crowd even before I could bid him adieu.

The remaining of the day was spent in being overjoyed and exhilarated. I was constantly staring and listening to Varun, hoping to catch my name. But instead, he just seemed to be ignoring me more.

xxxxxxx

It was college day today. That meant that it was the one day in the week on which we had to actually attend our college. I repeat, merely for attendance purposes. And some practicals. Which didn't interest me a lot to be honest. I usually tried to wiggle my way out whenever I could and bunk useless lectures in my limit. Which often proved to be unsuccessful, all thanks to my dear mother.

It was chemistry time today, so I joined the standing crowd in the laboratory. The students had thronged to such a large number, that a few apparatus broke even before the lecture had begun. Hence, the staff immediately divided the kids and sent a half over to the physics lab. The air was clearer now. I could even see Varun across.

"Okay, students. Today, we're going to learn how titration is done. I know that you must've studied it last year, but this is supposed to jog your memory pretty quick. Let's see who is on my radar today... Ahah!! You!! The girl in a burgundy T-shirt," the teacher yelled.

I was gazing around cluelessly, before she clearly pointed her finger out to me. Like, what the hell? What was a fucking burgundy T-shirt? I was clearly wearing an oak hoodie!!

"Yes, good. Come here real quick. Good. Now, carefully listen to my instructions and start following them."

I gulped down my anxiety, hoping that I wouldn't cause some kind of explosion. The teacher then prepared a kind of arrangement, and began explaining it.

"Now, you've to add just the amount of sodium bicarbonate to the titrated mixture. Carefully suck the liquid from the pipette till it reaches the mark and then put your thumb to keep it in place before dumping it into your solution."

She then turned to me to obey the step. I reluctantly dipped the straw-like thing in the beaker and sucked the liquid in. I must've really forgotten about this, because I sucked it up in one

breath. The liquid rushed up and shot right into my mouth. With the fear of burning myself with the chemical, I spit the pipette and chemical out, giving out a loud cry.

"It went into my mouth!!!"

"Don't worry, nothing will happ..."

But it was too late. My panicked state led me to accidentally put my hand into the shattered pieces of the broken apparatus kept behind me. This led me to cry out loud for another second, before the teacher ran to my help.

Everybody was just staring at me in pity and surprise.

"Somebody, take your friend to the nurse," she called out.

I expected Aruna or SK to come running and escort me away. But instead, somebody else decided to turn up.

"C'mon, Mahi, let's go," Varun held my arm and took me outside.

"Is it hurting a lot? Are you hurt anywhere else?" he continued.

His sudden concern made my already racing heart speed up.

"Yeah, no... I'm fine. It's just the hand."

"How the fuck did you manage to get into this situation? Can't you just pay a little more attention around?"

"Yes, daddy, I'm sorry!"

I intended to say it in a sarcastic way, but blushed as soon as I realized what else it meant. Thankfully, we were soon at the nurse's office, who was cozily lying in his chair, binge watching Taarak Mehta ka Ooltah Chashmah. He seemed rather annoyed to receive a patient.

He ordered me to sit on a crooked chair, and flatten my palm so that he could examine. He grabbed some tweezers and attempted to pull the shard out of my palm. But it hurt really bad, causing me to resist. The nurse at last got annoyed after failing a couple times.

"Hey, you! Why are you just standing there? Go on, hold her!!!"

Varun was abruptly stirred awake, and he touched my arm. He didn't force me to stay still. Instead, he just looked into my eyes.

"Mahi, listen to me. Look at me carefully," he said in a soothing voice.

The tone immediately calmed me down.

"It's just a shard. Nothing is going to happen. He just needs to pull it out. Don't worry, just relax. Lighten your body. Breathe,"

I took his advice and started to follow his guidelines. I continued to stare into his eyes, and my mind relaxed completely. I could see my own reflection staring back at me in his brown irises. Then even before I could react, the shard was pulled out. I let out a short, quick yelp, but my hand felt better.

Then, the nurse dressed my injury and told me to keep it dry and safe. I and Varun got up to take leave. I didn't even get to see the original wound that the shard had made.

"Listen, is your hand okay now?"

I gave him a subtle nod.

"Good. Do you want to continue the practical?"

"Hell no!! Why in my sane mind would I choose that?"

"Ok, then, let's go. I have a place in my mind."

"Oh, but my mother would kill me if she..."

"If she knew. Which she won't, I promise you. It's only a walking distance. C'mon!! Please!!"

His cute pleading succeeded in convincing me. So, after making sure that the watchman wasn't looking, we carefully snuck over the compound wall. Varun suddenly caught me by my other hand, which sent butterflies into my stomach.

He jogged and jogged and jogged, before finally coming to a halt near a bridge. Then, he advanced towards an almost invisible dirt path leading under the bridge. He caught both of my arms for support, and made sure that I was down safely. So sweet!

Finally, when we were down, I was surprised at the scenery. A totally natural canal flowed across, with complete bushes and shrubs overgrown all around. And although not entirely sure, the water did some a lot clean.

But Varun wasn't done yet. He asked my hand once again, and continued to lead me along the canal's bank. Finally, up ahead, I soon noticed a structure on a short cliff-like place. Upon climbing closer, it soon appeared to be a temple of Lord Krishna.

It was small and old, but the vibes around it were really pure. Varun paused finally in front of the door, and joined his hands in a revering namaskara. I followed him yet again. Past the door, stood two ancient but beautiful idols of Lord Krishna and his consort Radha.

"This temple is where I always come to pray before my tests," he added. "Just kidding... Not only for tests, but for any other goal in my life to achieve. They say that praying here gives you the strength to achieve them."

I nodded to him, and observed around. It was really peaceful. The place was a little isolated from the typical smokey and buzzing city.

"Yeah, and the environment too. Sometimes, I just drop in here to calm myself," he added.

"This... Is a really nice place. Which bird is that?" I asked him, pointing to a peculiar chirping bird up on a tree.

"That's, a hornbill. It's uncommon in the city areas and often found around here."

"You keep saying as if you come around frequently. But our college happens only weekly."

"Duh, I live two alleys across from here."

"What?! Are you serious? Why haven't you ever told me this before?"

"Before? Dude I must've replied to you a thousand times whenever you asked me how I was going home after college that I simply walk. Ah, you're really distracted I guess."

He then erupted into laughter, causing me to join.

"I prayed to Sri Krishna to heal your hand quickly," he uttered, causing me to blush.

"Tha...thanks."

"And listen. I'm sorry about yesterday. I was really pissed off. So I said some things that I didn't mean. You aren't a slackoff, Mahi."

"It's okay, Varun. I already knew that you didn't mean it. And besides, I don't mind being called a slackoff. Because I sure am!!!"

"Haha... No Mahi, but seriously. You are one of the most honest people I've ever met. At least you're so capable that people can talk about their problems to you. Thanks for asking about me."

"Oh, you better stop that now!!" I insisted, my whole face turning red.

I couldn't help but wonder if this all was the Matchmaker's doings. Because all of this was sudden. But whatever it was, it was magical. And I so wanted this.

Varun then hopped off to a lower rock, where he sat down to perfectly dip his feet in the canal. He waved me to join him, which I did. Upon rolling up my pants, I let my feet dangle in the warm water.

"This is so good!!" I exclaimed.

"Yeah, right? Oh, look, there's a fish!!" he pointed out to a thing floating in the water.

"Uhh... I think that's a shoe."

"What?? Oh crap, yes. Damn, people, just dirtying this water like that."

"Exactly!"

For a moment or two, we both stayed quiet and just enjoyed the feeling. The tree behind provided the perfect amount of shade in this hot afternoon. Suddenly, my proximity to Varun was notified to me. Our hands were dangerously close, and our fingers were practically touching.

I pushed them a little closer, and shockingly, Varun reciprocated!! He went on to entwine his hand into mine. This was proving to be the best day of my life!!

I was so cheered up, that I couldn't contain my excitement. In the flow, I decided to hasten things up a little. I leaned in towards Varun and aimed right for his lips.

He was taken by complete surprise. He didn't move for a second, but he didn't kiss me back either. Afraid, I drew myself back and awaited Varun's response.

It started to come in my mind that maybe I had been too quick. Stupid me!! The pace had been perfect, but I ruined it by trying to hurry things up!

"Uhh, I think it's late now, and the practical must've ended. Everyone must be looking for us, and your mom might get suspicious," saying Varun got up.

I was totally confused. What the fuck was on his mind?? Didn't he like me yet?? Had he started thinking of me otherwise?

For the time being, I just followed him back in silence.

6. SK

October, Monday, 3rd

"Are you serious? You seriously kissed Varun the day you just held hands?!" I exclaimed, which made Mahi conscious and signal me to quieten.

"Sorry. But how the hell did all this happen? All of a sudden?"

"I already told you. It's the Match..."

"The Matchmaker'... You can stop with that now. We aren't that gullible, okay Meh?" Aruna interrupted.

"No, I'm serious!! Why do you think I'm sitting with him yet?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm thinking about. If you say such events did occur yesterday, then how is Varun still sitting with you?" I added.

"Exactly!! It's because of that MM's magic!! Guys, trust me, this guy is insane. He can change the way people think!!"

"Okay, that's enough. I'm bored now. I think all the kissing that happened was in that dream bubble of yours," I replied.

"Ahh... What can I do to make you believe me?? Okay, you just wait. I'm sure something nice will happen over the course of time."

"Yeah, sure, sure. When pigs fly," Aruna sighed.

"But let's just say that the kissing thing did happen. Then what do you think I should do? How should I repair it?" Mahi continued.

"What's there to repair? Just confront Varun and ask him why did he hold your hand? Why did he lead you on if he didn't want to kiss you? Get a clear response to whether he likes you or not. If he acts reluctant, just simply state that you don't have time for uncertainties. Then, if he truly likes you, he'll accept it, or if not, then gal, just fucking move on."

Aruna's philosophies always hit my nerves.

"Urgh, Aruna, will you just shut up for a second. Mahi here isn't a playgirl. And neither Varun her use-and-throw toy. Mahi, do one thing. Do confront him. But not in the way Aruna says. Just, be subtle and polite. Apologize to him first and ask him of his intentions. If it turns out the way you want, then viola. But if not, then end the matter in a sophisticated way so that it doesn't affect your friendship."

"Oh, yeah, yeah, be all softy and let the guy take the advantage. Wait a second, why the hell are we even arguing over a non-existent fact? Just change the topic!" Aruna squealed.

xxxxxxx

It was late night now. I had been solving all the remaining questions. And I had to complete them there and then for some reason. Even though there wasn't any test immediately. It just, didn't feel right and satisfying to me.

Suddenly, my eyes lowered onto the mobile screen and I noticed that it was 0:00 in the clock. It was August 10 now. His birthday. I couldn't forget it even if I wanted to.

It had been a long time, and we did end on a good note, so I thought it would be nice to wish him. I pulled my Instagram and the home page popped up. Navneet's story already had the thank yous posted up. Like, who the fuck was wishing him before 12?

I pressed on to the create option, and added a photo of ours in the middle with the Happy Birthday captions and tagged him. Finally, I set the story on close friends only, and posted it.

Then, I took to wrapping up my study session, and was doing so just when my message notification rang. I picked up the phone only to see that Navneet had sent me a thanks right away. He seemed to be online.

I had wished to just like his message, but he started to type out of the blue.

"Hey, what's up? Been quite a while now, right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. How's your cricket?"

"Uhh... It's okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah, not that good tbh. My performance isn't that good yet. The other players are far better than me. I dropped a very important catch last match."

"Damn, that's bad. Don't worry, you'll get better over time."

"I don't know that now. Sometimes, I feel that cricket was really a mistake."

"Stop that, okay. It's not like that. You were so devoted towards cricket, then how can you just change it?"

"I think about that too. But the circumstances. They speak other things. Well, enough about me. How's your study going?"

"Oh, it's alright."

"Alright? Just alright? C'mon, I know you must be the topper for sure."

"Oh, it's nothing like that!!"

"Then tell me your marks. How much is it for the latest test?"

"Umm... 626."

"See? There's not that many total marks in my field, even for the final exam."

"You've taken commerce for fuck's sake. Both are totally different fields. You can't just compare them."

"Whatever. But I still can say that you're the topper. I guess you must've been studying as of now."

I blushed. I blushed hard. How the fuck did he get to know that? I immediately got up and closed all my curtains. Then, I replied to him with embarrassed and shocked emojis.

"Haha, see... You're so predictable SK. You're all the same you were when we met. Didn't change even a bit."

"Shut up!"

Just then, the door to my room budged open.

"Srikanya, beta, what are you doing up so late?" my father questioned.

I quickly messaged Navneet goodbye with lightning speed and slid my phone between my notes.

"Nothing, just study and doubts."

"It's already too late now. Stop that, and go to sleep. Just wake up early tomorrow. Besides, the brain capacity is at its best in the morning."

I couldn't argue with my dad. Just Indian parents things. So I quietly agreed to him and proceeded to end my day with a sound sleep. But all the while I lay on the bed, Navneet's messages floated in my mind. Did he like me still?

xxxxxxx

And the messages continued to roam in my mind till the next day. I think there is a need for a backstory to be revealed. So here it goes. It all started 3 years ago.

Actually, we knew each other from that even before that. Through mutual friends. But one day, I learnt that he had a massive crush on me. And I didn't know how, but it stirred something in me and I got infatuated with him too.

So being the sly fox I was, I too spread this fact around. When it got to his ears, he didn't waste too much time before asking me out. And that's how we became a thing in 9th grade.

Till now, I have believed that he was the best thing that ever happened to me. I have literally not felt the same way with anyone else. Even the 2 breakups I had were only with him.

And the main reason for that was... Our priorities. Throughout our relationship, our divided interests had continuously come between us. It led to our first, utterly immature break up. Which we immediately recovered from in a day. But the second one was the major one. It happened during the 11th grade, due to our different future paths.

As per my belief, Navneet was a lot inflexible than me, and he had many tantrums while adjusting our lives to make time for each other. So eventually, our enthusiasm for each other dwindled until 'we'... yes, don't listen to the others. We 'mutually' decided to end it, on a good note, and stay friends while focusing on our respective goals. But now, looking back on it, it feels like nothing but a mistake to me.

While sitting in the class, I was absorbed into the messages, before Kshitija shook me.

"Look what's going on with your friend!!!" she murmured in my ear.

She turned my head towards the doorway, from where I could see Mahi and Varun standing together in a corner outside. It didn't surprise me at first, but upon careful examination, I do noticed both of them holding hands.

"What the hell? Somebody, pinch me!!!" I cried, to which Kshitija twisted my abdomen.

"Oww!! Okay, this is real. It's happening in reality."

The realization hit me like a hailstorm. So, did that mean that everything about the Matchmaker was true? Had he really done some sort of spell and made Varun fall in love with Mahi? Was he Kamadeva or Cupid or something? A demigod? I was hell lot of curious.

In the recess, when Varun had gone to hang out with his male buddies, I opened the topic with Mahi.

"Oh my god, you too now, SK?" Aruna groaned as soon as she heard 'the Matchmaker' from my mouth.

"I'm not kidding. Ask anyone, Varun and Mahi were holding hands today!!"

"Yeah, yeah, I believe that. Okay? I'm convinced that Meh did manage to pull Varun into her clutches, and the kissing incident did really take place. But I refuse to listen any of this 'Matchmaker' crap. That a person magically manipulated Varun into developing feelings for Meh. You know what, you both continue. I'll talk to someone more interesting."

She then turned around and began attempting to talk with Lalit. Since when had she started to feel Lalit was interesting? And thinking that he would actually talk back to her? These 2 also surely had something, but it wasn't the time for that now.

"Mahi, are you two in a relationship right now?" I asked once again for confirmation.

"Yes, SK. Yesterday, at first, I was scared that maybe Varun didn't feel for me. But later, when I talked to him, he revealed that he was a little astonished because of the quickness, that's it!! And then, we soon confessed to each other and went on a date!! Can you believe it? I, dating Varun!!"

She was literally behaving like an adopted puppy. It was cute.

"Okay, okay. So this, Matchmaker. Can you show me to him?"

"Uhh... I'm not sure what batch he is in. But I do have his number. Maybe you can text him to meet?"

So I did. Took his number and messaged him about myself first.

"Yes, I know," he surprisingly replied.

"Meet me after class at the side of the center."

I showed it to Mahi, and we excitedly did a happy dance.

"But who do you want it for? Is it a new crush?" she asked me.

"No, obviously not. It's an old one. The only one."

Once the boring organic chemistry lecture was over, I bid a quick goodbye to my friends, and ran ahead to meet with the Matchmaker. At first, there didn't seem to be anybody present around the spot he had texted. But later, when all the classes were done and crowds of students were exiting, I didn't even realize when he had walked up to me.

He was an odd looking guy, a little taller than me in height and skinny build. His dressing sense seemed too weird, for he was wearing a black track pant on a rolled up full-sleeve purple T-shirt. He had his hair swept to his left side of the face, and was impulsively playing with a coin in his fingers. I wasn't sure what type of coin that was.

"Are you, the 'Matchmaker'? I softly asked him.

"Mandar Mandlekar is my name, but I often simply go by MM, or yes, the Matchmaker. I've been expecting you, SK," he spoke.

"Expecting me?"

"Ah, nothing. Speak out your issue."

"Can you really make people fall in love?"

"Love, is a complex term, my friend. I can't make a person follow you like an idiot, finding every chance to please you like a servant. But yes, I can cause a person to develop a kind of curiosity, an interest in you, and then things might proceed in a way that you may call as 'love'."

His words were mysterious and too mature.

"I... there's an ex-boyfriend. Navneet. I wish to get back with him."

"Hmm... a case of incomplete love. Most interesting ones to work on. So, done then. I promise you that in a day or two, you'll find yourself on the target's attention. But first, we must discuss the terms."

xxxxxxx

It had been two whole days, and Navneet hadn't texted me anything. I had began to think that maybe MM was fooling me. But he had no benefit from it. All he asked for me to do was to give him some 60 minutes before the week's end. And I could very well deny it if my job wasn't done. I was growing exceedingly impatient.

So, I just decided to text Navneet myself.

"Hey," I typed.

But another hour or so passed, and the message wasn't even seen. I was speedily pacing up and down my room, simultaneously thinking and anticipating. Finally, I got so frustrated that I threw my phone onto the bed. It bounced away and got stuck into a farther corner.

As I was hopelessly lying face down on the mattress, I realised that it was vibrating. Correction. The phone was vibrating. I crawled up to it and picked it up, only to surprise myself with Navneet's name.

He was calling me. I nervously answered it.

"He... Hello? Navneet?"

"Yeah, it's me. Can you talk for a minute?"

I swallowed down my hesitation and continued the conversation.

"Yeah, what happened?"

"Everything has just... Gone wrong."

"Why? How?"

"They removed me from the team."

"What?! How can they just remove you from the team? Didn't you say something?"

"Uh, actually, I'm not technically removed. But I was demoted to being the twelfth man. It's just like being off the team... Only playing when a main player is injured..."

"Yeah, I know what a twelfth man is. But why did they demote you?"

"I don't know... I guess it's my performance. Can I tell you a secret? I've started to think that this was all a big mistake. Maybe I shouldn't have opted to focus on cricket."

"Hey, don't say that. I know better than anyone else how much you like cricket."

"Yeah, but it's not just about liking. One should also be able to be succeed in it. What is the point if I'm going to be a substitute my whole career?"

"Your career hasn't even started yet, Navneet. You're still playing for the academy. If you focus on yourself..."

"I wish that we hadn't broken up."

That was so sudden of him.

"What?"

"That was my biggest mistake in life. Choosing cricket over us. I now realize what a blunder that was. Going down that path has cost me nothing but pain and distress."

I was now at a loss of words.

"We both decided it. We couldn't give each other time properly. Our passions lie..."

"Fuck passion, SK. What is passion? It is supposed to give you happiness, a drive to live life. But for me, it has given nothing but struggle and a sense of inferiority, and disappointment. Then, I remember the time we spent together. I was so happy. I couldn't ever find that feeling again. Not at all in pursuing cricket."

"So what? Are you just going to give cricket up? Are you going to leave everything and start preparing for NEET just to be closer to me? Get a hold of yourself, Navneet. You're distraught."

"I've got a hold of myself. I want to be with you, Srikanya."

That sentence sent a shiver down my body. What was he talking about? This Matchmaker... He was seriously not from this world. Whatever he was doing, it was totally unbelievable. Never had I expected to hear those words from Navneet's mouth itself.

"Can we meet?" he continued.

"Huh?"

"It's just been so long. Let's just meet... Like friends. I want to get this stress off of my mind. I'm not pressuring you into getting together... Just spend a day like old times."

"Okay."

7. Amyra

September, Thursday, 29th

"Please, learn something from Amyra. She has full marks in biology!! It's so simple, how can you guys mess up like that? This was the easiest paper I'd ever seen..."

And botany mam began again. This was the everyday schedule after a test result was declared. Each and every teacher, whenever their lecture was due after a test, took me as the ideal specimen and compared everyone.

It was so embarrassing. I mean, okay, I realised that it was so better being complimented instead of criticised. But still, it made me feel like an alien. And I hated to be the center of attention.

My gaze fell onto Vedraj and his friends, who seemed to be completely beyond the teacher's explanation. He was instead scribbling something into his book, and then nudged his partner to show it to him, causing them to chuckle.

The botany mam noticed it, and called them out.

"Come on, stand here near the board. You will continue to stand here till the end of the lecture!" she yelled, mistaking them to be school kids yet.

As I looked towards the merry Vedraj and Nischay head in front, I felt something sting in my heart. I realized how carefree and bold they were, while here I was. I don't even remember the last time I was scolded by someone.

Maybe it was the one time I corrected the teacher to a rather wrong answer. That was in 7th grade by the way. I haven't repeated that habit since.

But whatever, I snapped the feelings out once the teacher resumed her teaching. All this daydreaming and rumination was useless. We attended the center to study. And that was what we were supposed to do.

Besides, what were we without studying? Nothing. No study, no marks. No marks, no college. No college, no job, no money, no life. At least that's how my parents raised me. So I rarely compromised in my studies. I don't even remember when was the last time I 'hung out'. Definitely not later than 9th grade.

xxxxxx

"Hey, Amyra, we are planning to go to Oppenheimer this Sunday. You in?" Dhriti asked, eyeing me eagerly.

"No, I'm good."

"Aww, come on, there's no test in the upcoming week!"

"I know, but I have some backlog to cover. And besides, I always start studying for a test a week before. So, sorry, but you guys enjoy."

Her face dropped for a moment, before realizing I wasn't the last person she was going with. She then continued to chatter with her friends, which I didn't pay attention to.

Supporting myself by the compound wall, I took out my mobile and began scrolling Youtube shorts. Because Instagram and Snapchat weren't allowed on my phone. Nor did I felt any need for them. There were rarely any people for me to snap and chat with.

Like, duh! The current years were too important for us in our life. This one entrance exam decided our entire career!! This was no time to be making friends. Which was what my parents recited. And even though I knew somewhere that it was nonsense, it just stuck into my brain.

So here I was, standing alone, aside from everyone, waiting for my father to come and pick me up. He was unusually late today.

"Yo, topper. All attitude, huh?" Kartikeya came out of the blue.

"What topper? I'm not a topper."

"I don't even need to know your marks for that. Your face is enough for that."

Was it the specs?

"Shut up. I look better than you."

"Nobody said anything about 'better-looking'. Just saying, you're the typical saint girl..."

"Okay, enough. If you don't have anything else to talk about, please excuse me."

"Ahh, you took it seriously. I was just kidding. Anyways, what are you looking at?"

"I... That's private."

"Umm... Okay. Then... Do you watch Carryminati?"

"Carry... What? What the hell is that?"

"You don't know Carryminati? For real?"

I shook my head.

"Girl, he like... Roasts people. You know roasting? You know it's like, making fun of people, by sort of insulting them. Wait, I'll show you..."

He then pulled out his mobile and opened Youtube. Subsequently, he displayed a certain video to me, which immediately disgusted me.

"What the hell was that? He was cussing so much!!!"

"Yeah, that's what makes it funny!"

"It's not funny!! And the way he just targets those people... It's not comedy!! Just, don't show me something like that again."

"But it was just..."

"Shh... Stop now, my dad is here. If he sees me talking with a boy, he'll lecture me for hours after getting home. Bye now," I gave him a light push and got away from him.

There, my dad entered on his Pulsar bike. He looked at me with a stoic face, before signaling with his nod to sit. Our rides were usually quiet, except when it was result day.

"How... arks... Et?" he mumbled something.

Hearing him properly on the bike was too difficult, so I lay my ear on his back.

"How many marks did you get?" he repeated.

"Uh, 702."

"Good. But where did the 18 marks go?"

"A few silly mistakes in chemistry. And miscalculations in physics."

"Hmm... You need to practice for accuracy. Had you solved all the sample papers I had selected for you?"

"Uhh... I think I missed one."

"Beta... You miss, you miss. You know the competition out there. Just because you got 700 in this test doesn't mean that you'll get so in NEET. Many toppers mess up at the crucial moments and lose unnecessary marks. And that's exactly what you did, didn't you? Next time, solve all the papers."

I hummed to show my agreement. I don't think he saw my other 702 marks that I earned from sheer hard work. All that mattered to him was where the 18 marks were lost. I just hoped that at least he'll be happy if I get 720, and not ask me how many optional questions did I leave.

As soon as I reached home, my mother rushed to me. She made me stand in the doorway till she completed her ritual of warding off the supposed evil that leaches onto one after they've been 'looked on' by ill thoughted people. Najjar Utarna, is what it's called.

But when mom saw the top I was wearing, her mood changed instantaneously.

"What the... What was this you were wearing?"

"Uh... Just the top I usually wear."

"But why did you go outside wearing it?"

"Because my usual dress hadn't dried yet."

"So? You could've asked me!! Don't we have enough dresses? Am I mad performing these rituals to ward off the evil eye? And you're just roaming outside wearing such revealing clothes!!"

The useless quarrel ruined my mood wholly, and didn't at all let me feel that I had achieved first rank in the whole center. Though, honestly, it was my mistake. It was a regular thing, and still I did something unusual.

By this time, I should've gotten used to my parents' expectations of my way of appearing. Traditional kurti, two plaits, a bindi, the religious accessories and a scarf whenever they thought it was bad weather.

When I went to join for dinner, mom was still in the mood, and was berating me at trivial points.

"Is this how you're taught to sit while eating? Straight! And where are your manners? Have you prayed before eating?"

"I was going to do just that!!"

"Lower your voice!! You don't talk to elders in that way!" mom bossed over me.

"It's fine, Savitri, just let the poor girl eat in peace," my dad intervened.

"This is all because of you that this girl has been spoiled. You better stop doing her favors and be a little strict on her. Recently, I've noticed her closing her room's door all day. Listen here, Amyra, I want to see what you're doing all the time. Got it!!"

"Savitri... Cool down. It's fine. It's not like she chats with boys. I know our girl."

Well, according to my mom, I could definitely not close the door to block noises while I studied. That wasn't something her daughter could do.

This was the side effect of having teachers as your parents. Yes, both of them were, and they treated me just like I was treated in school. So half the time, I felt like I was living in my school, without any fellow students. Yeah, no siblings. I was surprised at why I wasn't simply homeschooled.

xxxxxx

I once again found myself simping on Vedraj. He was being noisy as always, being the center of the little circle they formed in the recess.

All that was running through my mind was the hypothetical scenario where he was my boyfriend. Such a fierce and straightforward guy he was. And not just that... He was good with girls. I wasn't sure how many, but his girlfriend count was definitely more than I could measure on my fingers.

He was always rebellious, and the usual restrictions and expectations didn't bind him down. He always did what he wished to. He had this aura of dominance that just mesmerized me, and made me feel the need to just hand myself over to him. To let him take over me.

But only if he ever noticed me. I mean, we did have some encounters. Very sweet encounters. I always liked the way he talked. He had told me about his village and cultural practices one day, which were really interesting. But our interaction was definitely not enough for him to ask me out. And there were already other girls in line.

"What's up with your mind?" Kartik brought me back from my imagination.

"Huh?! Ahh, nothing... I was just listening to what was going on. It seemed interesting."

"Since when were you interested in street brawls?"

"Street brawls? That's what they're talking about?!"

Well, I definitely wasn't interested in their conversations.

"Obviously! What did you think? Are you a lot into guys lately? Amyra, you're a good girl!!! Don't let yourself astray for God's sake!!"

Gosh, what was with people and this good girl stereotype they had given me.

"Shut up!! It's nothing like that, I am not interested in boys and all!! Shush, now don't disturb me, I want to go and ask doubts."

The stereotype which I liked to live up to.

Later that day, after the class was over, dad was late once again. So there I was, scrolling Youtube shorts. Just when, I was interrupted by yet another person. And this one, I had never met earlier. A strange guy with fringe hair, who was playing with a coin between his fingers.

"Do I know you?" I queried.

"No, but you will now. The name's Mandar Mandlekar, but people just call me MM or the Matchmaker."

"Okay, so? What do you want to talk to me about?"

"If you carefully listened to my name, you should've understood by now that I'm here to match you up with Vedraj."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!! What the hell are you talking about? I don't want to be matched with him... I don't like him or anything!! So please rid yourself of whatever misunderstanding you've got."

"Ha... I'm not going to waste both of our time debating on what is true. I'll simply provide you with a demonstration of my abilities. Your father... He isn't fond of you talking with boys, right?"

"Yeah, so what? Are you... No, wait, please don't do anything stupid, okay? Nothing will happen to you, but it will be me who gets all the suffering later!!"

"Oo... Too late. I can see him across watching us."

"What!!" I turned around.

Shockingly, I gazed at my father, who was looking at me with a silent annoyed glare. He was definitely not pleased with me talking to MM. But before I could do anything, MM blocked me.

"I'll buy us a little time and return in a moment," he said, as he walked towards my dad.

Now I was scared that something might happen to him as well. Like, what the hell was he even thinking? What did he even want to prove?

"Okay, Amyra, come in 5 minutes."

This statement by my dad left me utterly speechless. And he spoke that in a completely amiable manner. He was smiling at MM, who reproached me.

"Impossible!! What did you say to him? I know my dad well, and he would never act like that."

"It's not just your dad that I can convince to act like such."

I understood his reference.

"You... You can really make Vedraj fall in love with me?"

xxxxxx

It was the next day. As usual, I was tasked with buying vegetables for the day. Bitter gourd, potatoes and fenugreek. 2 of which weren't exactly my favorites.

After I had done my purchase, I was on my way back home, when I chanced upon someone.

"Oho, it's Amyra, right?" a guy spoke.

"Yes, Darshan, it's me."

"Been so long that I've seen you. You sure have started studying a lot. Don't you get tired of studying?"

Well, you know, Darshan was that kind of guy no one was interested in talking to. And he still always tried to butt in whenever he could.

"No. Bye," I tried walking away.

But he began following me.

"What's the hurry? Tell something about yourself. How hard is it to study for NEET? Do you even have any friends yet?"

"Darshan, please, just let me go my way."

"Ohh... What did you buy? Is it grocery? What is cooking at your home today? I bet you don't even have time to eat it out of your study!!"

Suddenly, a sharp noise cut him off. I turned around and was shook by Vedraj's presence there. Apparently, he had slapped Darshan, who was now trembling at the impact.

"Didn't she tell you to leave? Get the fuck away from here before I beat you bloody," he declared in a firm voice.

Darshan didn't say anything, but just scampered away. I was so grateful for his timely appearance.

"I asked, are you okay, Amyra?" I heard it the second or third time he said that.

Because at first, I was completely lost in his heroism. The way he just dropped in to save me... It was just like the fantasies they showed in the movies and dramas. Which I was really mad for.

"Oh, yes, yes, I'm fine... Now that you're here."

"Good. If he ever even looks at you, just tell me, and I'll kick his ass."

I blushed at that statement and chuckled.

"Thanks," I softly uttered.

"What's there to thank? I would do that for any of my female friends!"

So he just confirmed that I was his friend at least!! That was an assuring news. It meant I had a chance.

"But what brings you here?" I asked.

"I had to recharge my mobile plan at Ganesh Mobile Shoppee. What about you? You live around?"

"Yeah, up two streets. I was down for vegetables," I showed him my bag.

"Ooh, good, good. So, hey, I was in the mood for munching on a Vadapav. You interested?"

I was surprised at his invitation.

"Umm... Don't we have college?"

My natural instinct for the preference of studies kicked in. Stupid mind!! Why question something nice?

"Yeah, but this won't take long. And besides, nothing is more important than breakfast!"

He said that in a peculiar, funny way, making me laugh.

"Okay, fine. I'll come," I agreed.

Surely, my parents would've believed if I said it was too crowded in the vegetable shop.

"I like your glasses by the way," he casually mentioned.

But that mention totally got my heart. Was this what they called flirting? This compliment sure made my day.

So, we headed to a place that he claimed was the best for street snacks. He ordered 2 delicious Vadapavs. And all the while we ate, he entertained me with interesting chats.

"Aah... With such a tasty eatable, there surely needs to be a drink. How about a cutting tea?"

"Oh, no, I've already had it earlier. You can have it."

"Fine," and he ordered a tea.

But once it had arrived in that small glass cup, I just stared at in awe. It had been a while that I had drunk it at the roadside.

"You seem to want this," Vedraj noticed. "Here, have a sip."

Drinking from the same glass as Vedraj? How much better was this day gonna get?

8. Aruna

October, Tuesday, 4th

"Yeah, yeah, I believe that. Okay? I'm convinced that Meh did manage to pull Varun into her clutches, and the kissing incident did really take place. But I refuse to listen to any of this 'Matchmaker' crap. That a person magically manipulated Varun into developing feelings for Meh. You know what, you both continue. I'll talk to someone more interesting."

I was seriously bored of this drama. They were so insulting about my talents of attracting guys by claiming a superior middleman!! So, I turned towards Lalit. He seemed very interesting as of lately.

"Hey, what are you up to?" I whispered to him.

He was busy reading his notes as always, "Chapter 3 of Chemistry. Please talk to me only if you've a query."

"Oh... yes, I do have a query," I lied.

I just wanted to start a topic with him. He swam out of his book and looked at me puzzlingly.

"Okay, then. What problem do you have?"

"Uhh... Chemistry basically?"

I immediately understood by his expression that it wasn't an appropriate response. Yeah, of course, he wasn't going to sit and explain the whole of the chemistry to me bit by bit. So, I fake laughed to cover my blunder.

"Haha... no, it's this problem," I pointed out to a random question that I spotted from his book.

"Delta E naught of this reaction is 2.04 and another reaction is -1.09. Then what is the Delta E naught of the resulting reaction?"

"Yeah, that's the one. I added the E naughts, but the answer isn't matching."

Lalit sighed, "Hmm... the thing is, you cannot add Delta E naughts."

"What? Why?"

"You just... can't. It's a rule."

"What an absurd rule!! Anyway, then what is the solution?"

"You've to convert the Delta E naughts into Delta G naughts and then add them up. Then from the resulting Delta G naught you get, you've to convert it back to Delta E naught."

My mind was literally fuzzy. Chemistry was definitely not as easy as they made it sound.

"Ooohh... okay, okay. I get it now."

"That's it, right?"

"Uh... can you, like, solve it? I just want to be 100% certain."

Lalit gave another sigh, and picked up his pen to scribble something in his notebook. Meanwhile, I tried to examine his features. His jawline was so awesome, that I wanted to just chew on it. Not too fat, not too slim. And then his light stubby beard on his oval face. It was so manly!

His lips were a bit parched, but definitely bigger than mine. I liked rough things, and, rough guys. I was already lost in dreaming us kissing.

"You understand it now?" Lalit woke me to reality.

"Huh? Oh yeah, yeah. Got it now!"

"You didn't really mean to ask that, did you?"

Uh-oh. He was getting suspicious.

"I definitely did!! That's why I questioned you in the first place."

"Then tell me, how do you convert to Delta E naught from Delta G naught?"

"I... its..." I got caught.

"Aruna, please. If you genuinely don't have any important issue, then refrain from disturbing me. I'm trying to study."

"Oh, you're 'always' studying!! Before the class, in the recess, during the class, after the class!! Won't you get a stroke or something?"

"Stoke? Seriously? It's you I am astonished about. You are 'always' having fun!! You never seem serious for what you're here for. I don't know, you must be rich. But some of us really need to get into government colleges. Good ones if possible."

"I... don't have a rich family."

"Then why are you busy doing nonsense? Just study for God's sake."

I had come to a block, and started to strain my brain to come up with something. Suddenly, I started pulling my hair while shaking my head and groaning like a child.

"Oh my God! What the fuck is the matter with you?" Lalit surprisingly asked.

"I just can't... study. I don't know. But whenever I open a book to read, my eyes start to automatically sink and mind waver. Before I know it, I'm already dreaming!! What should I do now? My family isn't rich, and I can't score more than 300!!"

"Okay, okay, shush, calm down!! I'll help you study, fine?" he seemed to be dropping right into the trap.

Just then, our zoology teacher walked in.

"The recess is over. We'll stay after the class gets over. Is that fine?" he asked me.

"Umm... yeah, of course!! Perfect timing I'll say."

Now, I just had to think of a convincing lie to tell to my parents. Which was nothing new.

xxxxxxx

The center did stay open till the night, because there were evening batches to be conducted as well. In the meantime, a very marginal amount of students at very rare moments, stayed for self study or doubts. So just like that, we took permission from Mr. Patvardhan and decided to stay back in the same room where our class was.

That's how we started our chaotic study session. Chaotic, in the sense, regarding me, as I was always asking or commenting about something. Which I knew was my specialty. But Lalit seemed to keep himself together. He didn't look bored or irritated to my surprise.

"But how? How the hell is electricity going to come in handy when I become a doctor? Am I going to check humans or lightning poles?" I groaned.

"That's... a good question. Haven't really wondered about that. Maybe it has something related to our nervous system?" Lalit remarked.

"Pretty sure our nervous system doesn't contain resistors and capacitors."

"But why do you have to wonder about it? Just study what there is and be free. Don't dwell on questions that aren't going to be helpful."

"Is that how you do it? Just learn whatever you're told?"

"Yes... I don't see why should I not do that. All that really matters is just getting those marks in the NEET. Everything else is secondary."

I gave a snicker.

"What?" he seemed puzzled. "Do you have a better argument?"

"Of course. Studying is not your number one priority, you dummy."

"It is. For at least these 2 years till we get into colleges."

"Dude, there will always be something to study. You clear NEET and go into college, you'll have to study for the degree that you choose. After that, there's also post graduate shit. Study is never going to leave you alone. So the 'primary' thing to do in life is... simply living it."

Wow, there really must have been something in what my mother made yesterday for dinner. I was being so sophisticated.

"To simply live it, one needs money, Aruna. A lot of money."

I snickered again, "Exactly. You need money to live, Lalit. Not to live for money."

This seemed to confuse Lalit for a second, and he was lost in figuring out the sentence.

"That... I..."

"In the midst of studying, it is important that one doesn't forget to live their life. Live a little, nerdo."

"Hey!! I'm not a nerdo... Maybe."

I felt that this was my chance. Lalit seemed vulnerable right now. I could literally see his longing for enjoyment on his face. He was seriously tired from merely studying. I swiftly picked up his hands.

"Let's go for coffee!"

Lalit stared at our hands for a second, then abruptly jerked his away.

"Ohh, you!! You just want to take me out for a date!"

"So what? A pretty girl asking out a nerdy guy like you. I say, this is a very rare and good deal."

"No, thank you. I have better things to do than this 'time pass'!! I know very well what kind of girl you are."

Time pass didn't seem the right word for him. Lalit didn't feel like a time pass. As he began to pack his things up, I caught his hands once again.

"No, Lalit, I'm serious. I really want to go out with you. You're not just a timepass for me."

"Says the girl who changes boyfriends every week."

"Please, just trust me. It is not like that. They were just objects of entertainment... but you. You are not like them. You are different!"

"Listen, I don't care how you think. But either way, I'm not interested in any relationships. As I told you, dating is just a waste of time. Especially in this age where we're not even sure who we like. And then, eventually, it just takes a toll on your studies and progress and drags you down."

"No, no, no!! I promise you that I won't make you compromise your studies!"

Lalit had finished packing his bag as of yet. He didn't look in the mood for changing his opinion.

"If you really promise that, then just stay away from me," he said as he put on his bag and walked away.

This wasn't the first time I had faced rejection. But it was the first time rejection actually hurt. I've never felt the inside pain that it gives to one. Was Lalit never going to like me? Was this always going to be a one sided relationship that existed in my imagination? No, that wasn't possible. I was Aruna. The playgirl of Prabodhan Coaching Center. There was in no way that a nerd like Lalit could turn me down.

xxxxxxx

The next day, I had put on the best of me. Maybelline mascara and its toffee brown lipstick lay on my face. Whilst, the right amount of foundation and blush enhanced my dusty complexion. I was confident enough to say that I looked pretty. An off shoulder orange flower top, and purple jeans were just what were needed to complete my look. And of course, a little bit of fragrance. The one that attracted members of the opposite sex.

That was how I went to the class. As soon as I entered the building, I could already feel the attention on me.

"Looking good, Aru," Vedraj called, while Irfan beside him gestured to me the same.

But when I entered the class, there was already someone sitting on my seat.

"What's he doing on my place?" I asked Lalit, pointing to the other guy.

"Rajat here is seriously malnourished in studies, and he needs my help. You had your chance, now it's his turn. Please be considerate of others," he answered back.

All the excitement left my face, and just a gloom remained. I took that gloom and forced myself beside SK, who was thankfully sitting alone as of now. She had the exact opposite emotion stuck on her face as me.

"What's the matter with you? Such a good look and yet such a bad spirit?" she asked me.

"Someone didn't get what they wanted," Mahi added from the front.

"I don't get what's wrong with that fella!! I've tried everything to make him like me, but all he cares for is his fucking physics and biology!!!"

"And chemistry," Mahi interrupted.

"Whatever the fuck!! Is he gay or asexual? What guy rejects an incoming proposal?"

"Ooh... that's really disappointing. You, and got rejected? I mean, an accident is more likely to happen in front of our center than this. Come here, my girl," SK tried to embrace me, but I refused it, not being in the mood.

"My ego is hurt," I mumbled. "I'm not resting till I regain that... what the hell are you so happy for today?"

I was annoyed by SK's unusual enthusiasm radiating from her. I took out my bottle to have a sip of water to soothe my wound.

"Oh me. Well, there is some news..."

"What news?"

"I got back. With Navneet."

I spit the water out from my mouth.

"Eww, Aruna!! That's gross!!" Mahi shrieked, who had some droplets sprayed on.

"What?! How!! How the hell did you manage to do that?"

"Well, if I told you, you wouldn't believe me."

"What is it with fate? You both have gotten someone, and here I am, the playgirl, being rejected!!"

"It's not fate, Aruna. You can have it too," Mahi remarked.

SK leaned in, and whispered, "The Matchmaker."

This was too infuriating now.

"Okay, I'm so done with this Matchmaker. That's it, I want to meet him, right now!"

My friends gave me a contact, which replied to me as soon as I messaged him. We decided to meet in the recess much to my dismay. So, I sweated it out during the entire chemistry lecture. Once the bell rang, I packed my things and rushed out of the class.

At the preplanned spot, there was no one except me to be seen. I was thinking that I had been pranked, just when a peculiar guy appeared out of nowhere. And for some reason, he was impulsively gliding a coin between his fingers.

"So you're the one they call the Matchmaker, huh? You matched up SK and Mahi?"

The guy had some serious calmness on his face, "Sure did. Before you suspect me for being a fraud, think once again whether you really believe your friends to have made those accomplishments on their own, solely at the time's mercy?"

He had a point. There was in no way SK and Mahi could get those guys. And it seemed to be a bit too much for an antic to be going on for such a time.

"But how can you do that? Even an extrovert like me, who knows everybody, couldn't do it."

"My skills are more than just mere social contacts, my friend. And they are just as a secret. Let's get to the business."

"If you really are the Matchmaker, then set me up with Lalit. Do you even know him?"

He let out a chortle, "Lalit's a good challenge. He's really uninterested in relationships. Yet, I can make him otherwise. A little time will be needed. But I assure you, the target will begin to give you more importance."

"If that doesn't happen, I'll spread everywhere that you're just a fake. Because I'm really serious right now."

"And I never joke. So, be welcome to wait for that in vain. Now, that was your end of the deal. Let me hear you mine."

xxxxxxx

I dressed as usual the next day. I had a 50-50 hope for whether MM was really genuine. Because the way his conditions lay, there didn't seem to be any advantage for him to have over me. He'd only get his 1 hour if my work was done. But Lalit's personality seemed really rigid to be changed.

All my hope on the brighter side disappeared, when I witnessed Lalit still sitting with Rajat. He didn't even look at me when I entered and took a seat beside SK. She and Mahi both noticed my situation and the dissatisfaction on my face.

"Hey, just give it a little time. The crushes don't start to cling onto you immediately. They just naturally start noticing you," Mahi said.

"Yeah. It took 2 days for Navneet to call me," SK joined.

I didn't comment anything else on that matter, for I had abandoned all my expectations. I simply embraced the incoming physics lecture to be dealt with. Mr. Patvardhan seemed really in the mood today to teach.

"Okay, so it's time for a QNA session that I'm starting from today. The ones who are asked will have to stand at the back if they answer wrongly. And all that will be accounted to be shown at PTM," he announced to everyone's fear.

"So, let's see who the session should be inaugurated with."

I was hastily praying for my name to not pop up.

"Aruna, you seem too tense to answer. Let's start with you!!"

What the fuck!!

"So tell me, what is the formula for the electric field inside a solid sphere?"

I was probably dozing off at that one time. I stayed silent, pretending to reminisce. Just then, a flapping thing caught my eye. A notebook further in the benches was lightly flapping. On its corner was written ' ρr by 3 epsilon naught'.

" ρr by 3 epsilon naught," I answered.

"Very well. Looks like you get to sit. Okay, to the next person!!"

I was very grateful for this assistance. I wished to meet with my helper in the recess. When the lecture ended, I pursued my helper to the canteen.

"Why did you help me?" I asked him.

"So, don't you want me to be helping you?" Lalit replied.

"No, it's not like that... I'm sorry. And thanks, for helping me."

We looked at each other in silence, before I concluded that there was nothing else to be said and took my leave.

"Hey, do you need any more help in studies? I'm free today after class," he shouted, to which I turned around.

This was a miracle. Lalit would definitely not say that. Was he really the boy I liked? Or an impostor?

9. Kartikeya

October, Monday, 2nd

There was no doubt now that the Matchmaker was real. He fucking matched Amyra with Vedraj!! Two people from the complete opposite ends of the social spectrum.

I hastily went to the spot where I had texted the Matchmaker to meet. Amyra had provided me with the contact. It was near the same bus stop that we had met the other day. He was wearing the exact same outfit, and still playing with his coin. Which I couldn't tell of what denomination it was.

"Welcome, Kartikeya. Was hoping to see you soon."

"You... How did you do that..."

"No time for that Kartikeya. Some secrets just stay secrets for the best. The point is the target, that is, your crush."

"My crush? Well, it's a little different," I began.

"Perhaps not the occasional human female every male is running after, huh? Maybe some other gender..."

"Okay, here, it is. I, I... Em... I'm not, like, others. My liking is differently... Oriented. You know what I'm saying. I mean, I'm not straight. I mean, it's like..."

"For fuck's sake let's just complete as shortly as we can. You're gay, and you like boys. I hope I'm correct."

I blushed, and instantly checked around whether anyone had been eavesdropping. If this happened to fall on anyone's ears, I would be in big trouble. I was already not less of a laughing stock, and this thing added would just make me the ultimate fool.

"Shh... Keep your sound fucking low. And yes, I'm gay. Does that change things? Are you like only for heter..."

"I said it the last time and I'll say it again. The nature of the target doesn't matter. I can make anyone start noticing you."

"Then make him. Make Satbeer like me. But, there's a catch... Satbeer might not be gay."

"As I said, it doesn't matter. Sexuality, my friend, is nothing but a mentality. And mentality, can be altered."

"Se... seriously? You better not be fucking kidding, okay, because this is not something I'd like being mocked of. I haven't heard of anyone being capable of changing a person's sexuality."

"And you just as hadn't heard of a person capable of making people attract towards certain people."

He had a point. This guy was really something else.

"But before that, there are some conditions."

"Conditions, yes. Please, elaborate."

xxxxxx

I nervously set for the class next day. I was heavily anxious as to how things would turn. And what if anyone got to know about this?

I had to do pranayam in the bus to calm myself down. Thankfully, it wasn't that crowded to make sweat odors fill my lungs. When I reached, everything was just as it was everyday.

The usual teasing and joking occurred between me and the other boys. But when Satbeer came into my view, I was frozen. I was afraid of how our interaction was going to be. We soon walked towards each other, and gave each other the usual hand slap.

My whole body sent a current running along as soon as his hand touched mine. His hand was magical, and his touch a spell. He then grasped my whole arm, leading to a higher voltage shock.

"Bro, Happy Birthday," I wished my dear friend.

"Thanks bro. You know a funny thing, you were the first to wish me today."

There was in no way that I was wishing him first at the center in this era. He was talking about the Instagram story I had put up at 12 am sharp. Which I did mean to be the first.

"How old are you now? 18?"

"Yeah. You know what it means? Legal age of sex passed!" he exclaimed.

Just then, our third member took us by surprise from behind as he embraced us by the shoulders.

"You're 18 running, you moron. You need to be complete," Varun corrected.

"Oh yeah, that's right. You're a 2006. Fuck you, Satbeer, you made me falsely proud for a moment there."

Satbeer gave a groan, "Ah damn it. And here I was, planning how to get a girl."

A girl? Hadn't the Matchmaker done anything? But wait. Satbeer wasn't going to say a guy out loud even though he liked one. This was India, my friends. Not a place for gays. Either your family does an honour killing, or an enthusiast from the community. Well, maybe not literally nowadays, but still not that better.

I continued, "So, bro, do we need to insert the topic of a party yet, or are you already generous eno..."

"Ahaha... Well, there's a surprise waiting for you."

"Tell us, tell us!!" Varun charged.

"Look here, at this chap. A lot of excited since you started dating, huh?" Satbeer teased Varun.

"Hey, Satbeer, bro!!" Vedraj came out of nowhere. "Happy Birthday my man!!!"

"Happy birthday, brother from another mother. Where's the party," Irfan joined in.

"Bro, bro, chill. There's going to be one, this evening."

"Ahh, that's my true brother!! That's what we want!" Irfan cried.

Fucking bloodsucker.

"Hey, Satbeer, many many happy returns of the day!!" Umesh greeted, and the line just grew.

We were in no time surrounded by our usual gang, and all the conversations were around Satbeer. Some guys were trying to give him birthday bombs, while others were mistakenly convinced that he was an adult and had begun making mischievous plans.

But as far now, there seemed to be no personal attention that I received from him. The earlier acts don't count because they were the usual things between us. Yet, it might just have been that he was busy due to everyone wishing him. My curiosity was killing my cat.

The lectures had passed by very slowly. Or maybe it was just my excitement for Satbeer's birthday that made time stretch away.

"Where's your house though?" I asked the birthday boy, as we were taking our leave.

"It's down Ramchandra Chowk."

"Huh? Where is that?"

"Erandwane."

"Strange. I didn't know such a place existed in Erandwane," I remarked.

"There are a lot of places in Pune, shorty. How many of them would you know?" Irfan interrupted.

"Fuck you, lamp post."

"And you better not do this drama or the curses in my house. My family's pretty strict, and they won't hesitate to kick someone out if they felt they were inappropriate," Satbeer asserted.

"Tell that to this tower head," I referred to Irfan.

"Okay, so guys, be there till 6. Don't be fucking late," Satbeer said, as he waved to his black Jaguar.

xxxxxx

"Please, ma, he's a really good friend. That's why I want to do this," I insisted.

"So, what? Are we now that rich to just spend our money on everybody?"

"But ma, he's rich. If I do this, they will return the gesture on my birthday too. And who knows what they would do with all their money!!"

This caught my mother's attention. I felt bad using Satbeer's status in this way, but it seemed the only way to persuade my mother.

"Okay. But only 150 rupees," she said, finally removing some cash from her purse.

"Yess!! Thanks, ma!" I exclaimed softly.

Because if my father got to hear about this even by mistake, he would've beat me black and blue. Satbeer was too lucky that his family could arrange a party for him. For me, birthday was the one day my parents spared hitting me and if they considered, then criticizing too.

So, collecting the money, I set for Satbeer's house. The bus required extra money, which came from my personal savings. After suffering for almost an hour hanging in between sloppy and smelly people returning from work, I finally reached my destination. It was one of the biggest houses I had ever seen. The entry gate and further path had been well decorated. As I attempted to enter, the watchman stopped me.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" he stated in a pompous manner.

"To the party."

"Have you been invited?"

"What kind of question is that? Of course I am!! Are you trying to call me a tramp?"

"Then why aren't you carrying any gift?"

"Because my other friend is buying the cake from the shop near him, and I'm supposed to give him my share of money later."

"I can't say. Anyone can just walk in claiming they are friends..."

"Mama, what are you doing? Let him in, he's my friend," Satbeer approached from inside.

The watchman had now gone completely dumb, and Satbeer came up ahead to escort me.

"Your watchman is really rude," I said.

"Yeah, sorry about that. Last time, a few vagrants walked in and created a scene, so we've made our guard a little stricter. So, where's my gift?"

"Ahh, see this. Greedy bastard!!!"

Just then, a man suddenly popped in front of us as we were walking to the backyard.

"Satbeer, who's this?" he asked in a grim tone.

"Dad, he's my friend from the class, Kartikeya. One of my besties that I told you about."

His father examined me from head to toe in a second, before simply walking away with the same solemn expression that he came with. He did indeed look like a scary person.

"Dude, what did I tell you? Don't go cussing around in here! My parents are too judgmental," Satbeer whispered to me.

"Sorry, I'll behave."

"Where's Varun?"

"He's not here? Damn, that idiot. Wait, let me call him."

I pulled out my phone and dialed his number, but he didn't answer it.

"Must be on the bus. Let it be, he'll be here soon. Come here, I'll introduce you to my fam."

We had finally reached the backyard. It was all decorated with flashy lights and confetti. Even, the tables and chairs were magnificent, and a subtle music was heard in the background. There seemed to be a little room for more arrangements, which yet had to be made. The vultures, i.e., Irfan, Nischay and Umesh were already present, chatting with Vedraj and another group of people that I didn't recognize.

"Guys, look who's here!!!" Satbeer announced.

But none of my classmates seemed that excited to see me.

"Fam, this is Kartikeya, one of my best friends. Kartik, this is my paternal uncle's son, Ajeya, and my paternal aunt's son, Mihir. And here is the infamous Tejas bhaiya."

All those guys waved back to me. I was really glad to meet Tejas bhaiya. He was Satbeer's maternal aunt's son, whose strange and unique escapades entertained our whole gang. I didn't know whether it was true, but Satbeer told us once that Tejas bhaiya was caught drunk driving on a bike with his friends. And when caught at a police check post, he tricked the cops and drove the bike carefully amidst the policemen and obstructions and escaped successfully. All the while being drunk enough to collapse on reaching home.

"Hey, guys!! Hope I'm not late!! Happy Birthday!" Varun came, running, with the cake box in his hands.

"Welcome, Mr. Romeo. So now that everyone has arrived, let's start our programs!" Satbeer announced.

"Yes please. I've been waiting for it since I knew it was your birthday," Ajeya squealed.

"Okay. So our first major event is... Treasure Hunt!!"

Everyone gasped in surprise.

"What do we have to find?" Varun questioned.

"Frankly, I don't know that either. Bro, it's my birthday and you think I'd not be a participant? Tejas bhaiya has planned the whole scheme. Each of us will form a team of three, and there are chits on the table, below the bowls to begin."

"Whoa, wait a second. Whichever team you'll go in will get the advantage!! How the hell are we supposed to navigate in your house?" Vedraj protested.

"Don't worry, each team will have one of my fams. They know the house very well. The teams will be, obviously, me, Varun and Kartikeya. Mihir, Vedraj and Nischay, and Ajeya, Umesh and Irrfan. So goodluck everyone, in finding the treasure. You have an hour. Just remember not to dig up too much, and to not touch any valuable object. It's been a really tough job to convince this game to my father, you know."

"Yeah, yeah, bro. We definitely not that desperate to steal things," Umesh cried.

"Good luck finding the golden shit," Tejas bhaiya winked.

So, starting the game, we approached the table and dragged our chit from beneath the blue bowl.

"I have oceans, but I'm not wet. I'm just a small thing, but represent something so great," it said.

"The f... hell? How can something have water but not wet?" Varun whined.

"The ocean then definitely isn't water. A metaphor, maybe?" Satbeer added.

"Or maybe it really is ocean, just not the one we are used to," I suggested.

"What do you mean?" Satbeer asked.

"Oceans are also found on maps, world map to be precise. That must be the great thing it represents. You have a map somewhere?"

"Map? No, there's no... aah! But there is a globe that we keep in the study."

"Bingo then."

We immediately headed to the study. The house was filled with people, seemingly Satbeer's relatives. And for some reason, they seemed to be distributed evenly in every room. Probably a tactic to keep watch everywhere. With more wealth came more worry about its protection. As we were entering into the study, we came across Satbeer's father again. He gave me and Varun a weird judgy glare.

"Tell me about your friends a little, Satbeer. What do your parents do?" he looked at us.

"My father is a neurosurgeon, and mother an assistant manager in Infosys," Varun answered.

Then it was my turn. I nervously stared back at him in the eyes as I swallowed down my fear.

"My... my father works in a travel agency. And mother is a housewife."

I could tell from his stare that he was despised of my status, but still tried to maintain a polite gesture.

"Father, please, later. Right now, we're in a hurry!" Satbeer urged, which moved the big man.

We rushed inside and spotted the huge spherical device lying across. And there was in no way that we were about to fiddle with it arbitrarily, because I could still feel Satbeer's father's gazes from the back. After some careful inspection, I finally noticed a piece of paper tucked in its underside. As I pulled it out, I accidentally bumped into something. But thanks to my great reflexes developed while avoiding my parents' constant attempts to hit me, I caught the object just fast enough, and placed it back.

"Hey!! What are you doing! Can't you be careful!!" there came the bark that I was afraid of all along.

Satbeer's father hastily paced up to the object and tended to it.

"It is a rare artifact that costs 5 lakhs. Were you going to afford it had it been damaged?"

"I'm really, really sorry. I'll-I'll be more careful," saying I trod out of the room with my team.

We came across Ajeya, Umesh and Irfan, who looked surprised to see us.

"Too slow guys," Varun taunted.

"Not for long. Definitely not gonna lose to shorty," Irfan blabbered as they ventured into the study.

I ignored the remarks and proceeded to read the chit.

"Touch me, and I will shatter. Light me, and I will glitter."

"Touch and shatter seems like something fragile. Maybe something like ceramic or glass?" Varun stated.

"Light and glimmer... glass... okay, I think I get it!" I exclaimed. "This seems to be that thing they taught us. When the light enters certain objects and gets split. Dispersion or something. There something like that in your house?" I deduced.

"Something like... uhh, I'm betting on 2 things right now, actually. There are these glasses somewhere in the store that do that when kept in light. And then again, there's a glass pane in the drawing room too," Satbeer explained.

"Let's divide then. Varun, you go to the pane. It's down the hallway, at the right. I and Kartik will check out the glasses."

Following the decision, we soon went our ways. We reached the store room (which my house wholly was), and thankfully there wasn't anyone to supervise. It was all quiet. We began searching for the glasses.

"Hey, I'm sorry about my father back then. He shouldn't have said that," Satbeer suddenly uttered.

"It's fine. I'm used to it."

"No, you shouldn't be. You should've said something."

"Why? To get kicked out of your house?"

"Not to my father. To Irfan, when he called you names. You should really stop being a pushover, Kartik. Because you are not. You only become a pushover if you believe yourself to be one. Stop thinking like that. Because for me, you're one of the toughest people I know."

I was surprised and really encouraged by those words coming out of his mouth. I didn't even realize that our hands were touching. Then, in a moment, our lips were too.

10. Varun

October, Sunday, 2nd

It was finally the day. The day Sanika came back home. She had lived next to me, the entire childhood. And now, she studied at AIIMS Rajkot.

All my life, she was like a sister figure to me. Older by merely a year. Until I hit puberty. All of my feelings changed towards her. She suddenly then wasn't just the girl who used to boss me around, teach me new things and guide me in life. She became something a lot more.

But, the opposite didn't seem to be true. She continued to treat me as she did. She never looked towards me as someone other than a younger brother. But somewhere in my heart, I had a hope. A hope that all these years of friendship would eventually evolve into something more.

And the only dream of my life was to get closer to her by getting into AIIMS Rajkot. Until yesterday. Something suddenly changed. With Mahi. I started to feel something different. Similar to what I felt with Sanika.

When she kissed me without warning, I was just bedazzled. But I felt really awesome. I had never kissed before, so maybe it was just pure lust. Or maybe not. The feeling was just... Too good.

I thought about it, and wondered if maybe I and Mahi could be a thing. We were good friends for 2 years after all. But Sanika was my lifelong crush. All my life, I had only one dream and it was to be with Sanika.

So it was now an intense dilemma for me. Sanika or Mahi? Someone who I'm not sure I'd end with or someone who is madly in love with me? Someone who I've crushed on since childhood or someone towards whom I'm not even sure of my feelings?

Or both? I chuckled at that thought.

"Hey, smiling demon!" my mom called me playfully, "Are you going to keep laughing or do some things? Remember what you promised? That you'll do your chores yourselves and all?"

"Oh!! Yeah, yeah, just a minu..." then I remembered that making excuses was childish. "Yeah, I'll do it right away."

I immediately started to tidy up my room and set the laundry. To be able to match with Sanika, I needed to be more mature than my age. That was the only way to make her see me as someone as a potential boyfriend. And mature people did their own work. She often told me how she didn't have anybody's help over there in the hostel at Rajkot.

After a while, when I had finished my revision, I heard my bell ring. My parents' excitement already told me who it was. As I rushed into the drawing room, a figure swooped at me and hugged me tight.

"Okay, that's enough, you're choking me!" I tapped Sanika's arm.

But this was exactly what I needed to make my day better. To be in Sanika's arms.

"How are you, my dear Varu? I've missed you a lot!" she exclaimed.

Her face had changed since the last time we had met. She had grown prettier. Her radiant smile just changed the atmosphere.

"Sanika didi!! What did you bring for me?" my little sister came trutting from her room.

"Meena, she isn't living abroad to always bring something for us whenever she returns. It is rude to ask our guests like that."

"No need to sadden my sweet Meenudi!! I will always bring something for her!!!"

Then, she took out a cubical fidget spinner. It was strange but magnificent. Meena gleefully grabbed the toy and began rotating it around. Soon, my parents also had a proper conversation with her, and finally, she did the needful.

"So, Varu. Should we go to our place?" she stated.

And that was how we occurred to be on the highest peak in the area. No, no. It wasn't a hill or cliff or anything like that. It was simply the water tank on the top of our terrace. Of course, we didn't sit on the tank itself. But it had some space around it that pretty much towered everything around. All the other buildings and their roofs were very easily visible from the height, except one under-construction building which was somewhat taller.

It was very serene and pleasant over there. The weather was also cloudy, shielding any possible sunlight. I could feel the nostalgia coming as the cool wind brushed past my neck. It was the best feeling I could have with my favorite person.

"So, how are the classes, Varu?" she asked, lost in the feeling.

"They are... good. There is this physics sir I told you about, he just keeps yelling and criticizing everyone. And then, this botany mam that teaches us like school kids. Do you know what she did to one of my friends from the other batch? She told him to stand beside the board!!"

Sanika erupted in laughter, "Oh, gosh, that's so bad. I don't even remember when was the last time I had received a punishment like that."

"And what about you? How is AIIMS for you?"

"Ohh, it... is wonderful. You know, I finally got to see a dead body!!"

"Damn! Were you scared?"

"Scared? Hell, no! Why would I be scared at such a marvelous moment? I saw many of the human organs live, in front of my own eyes. They seriously looked like plastic. The intestines literally resembled a hose."

"That... sounds weird."

"Urgh, you're going to be a doctor, for fuck's sake. Don't worry, Varu, it's normal now. You'll grow up soon."

Fuck me. I shouldn't have said that!! That really downgraded my image. She was right... mature people weren't afraid of such gore shit.

"Okay, enough about that. What about you? What's up with you? Have you got a girlfriend yet?"

That question startled me. At least, I didn't expect it to come from her mouth. I wasn't sure, but it made her sound that she wasn't looking at me as a potential boyfriend. Then suddenly, my mind

drifted into the thoughts of Mahi. She looked at me the right way. The thought even crossed my mind that maybe Mahi was more familiar to me now than Sanika.

"Haha, I'm not 12 anymore Sanika. I'm not distracted by such lost causes. My only goal is to get into AIIMS."

"Good... How much did you get on your last test?"

"505."

Her silent look alone told me that it was useless. I had to work harder. I had to get into that college anyhow. To be with her. But then, what about Mahi? Would I ever get to see her again? Fuck, why was I thinking about her?

"Bro... to be honest, that's not enough. I mean, you did good, definitely not bad. But to get into an AIIMS, you need to get at least 630. But that's okay, you still have a lot of tests before the final one... you can surely reach it if you do better. I know it Varu, you can do it."

Her encouragement gave me a glimmer of happiness in that cloud of self hatred. Our atmosphere was abruptly disturbed by a noise. I looked down and noticed Asmay on the roof, holding some kind of speaker that was emitting a loud song. And it was definitely not that soothing.

"Hey, Asmay, can you turn down that volume a little?" I asked him.

He gave me a cocky glance, and replied, "The music doesn't reach my soul if it isn't this loud."

"But there are other people around here. Why can't you be a little thoughtful? Wear earphones or som..."

"Shut up. If you don't like it, just go sit in your apartment."

I could see how distressed Sanika was feeling from her face. I wasn't going to let her get troubled like that. I had to show her that I wasn't a kid anymore, and that I could protect her. So, I began climbing down the ladder.

"Hey, what are you thinking? Don't bother yourselves, he's older than you!" Sanika whispered.

"He needs to be taught a lesson."

Asmay didn't seem to pay heed to me walking up to him. Once he noticed that I was near him, his jolly face immediately developed a frown.

"You getting a little too smug there, Varun? Wanna mess with me?" he snarled.

He did look stronger than me, but this was no time to just silently tolerate it. I had to act grown up, and deal with my problems. I could do it. I just took a deep breath, and slapped Asmay across his face.

He didn't waste another moment, and began hitting back. His strong hold grabbed me, and made it difficult for me to make my moves. I gave him a punch on the face, but he slapped me really hard a couple times, and elbowed me in the stomach. He was overpowering me. He then pushed me really hard, and tripped me down with his feet. He then kicked and punched me as I lay down helplessly.

xxxxxx

I had just returned to my room after receiving scolds from my parents. After the fight, Sanika immediately broke the news to them. And all chaos followed. My parents got involved in their own quarrel with Asmay's parents, but the neighbors calmed both of them down and made them reconcile.

But it wasn't over yet. They still had to give me an earful for striking first. And I had to pretend to apologize to Asmay. Which I obviously didn't mean. If you give bad, you get bad. There was nothing wrong in what I did.

Sanika followed in with an ice pack that she held to my cheek. I took it from her and applied it myself.

"Saw that, Ms. Sanika? I can take on bigger problems. I'm not a kid any..."

"Why are you so proud about it?" she suddenly snapped. "You did nothing great."

"Huh? What do you mean by that? He was troubling us!!"

"So what? There wasn't the need for violence!! Stop acting so strong, Varun. That was just childish. You haven't grown up yet. You're still the same kid you were who couldn't control his emotions. You have to realize that it is not how the world works. Just beating your way through won't resolve everything. Grow a little!!"

It was getting tedious now. Her constant comparison of me with a child. I didn't expect this to be coming from her. I took those blows just to please her, and this was what I got. I got up from the bed and ignored her cries as I went inside the bathroom, and had a little emotional breakdown, rumination and some alone time.

xxxxxx

The next day, I went to the class with a sullen face. I didn't talk with everyone with the same energy I usually did. When my friends asked me the matter, I just brushed them away, and continued to sit in my classroom. Then, things became more awkward when I realized who the person whom I had taken my seat next to was. But, it wasn't actually that awkward. I rather felt... comfortable.

"Hey," I uttered.

"Hi, what's up?" Mahi said to me, as if nothing had happened between us.

I thought of avoiding the topic, but something in my heart just forced me against it. I didn't want to push myself away from her. And especially after all those events yesterday, I felt relaxed in her presence. My mind started comparing her with Sanika. Maybe Mahi was really worth it. Maybe it was time for me to change my dream. Maybe some people weren't really how you thought of them.

"About that day, I... am really sorry. I shouldn't have run off like that. It was just that... Everything happened so quickly, and I wasn't prepared for it. Like, you know right, that I haven't been in a relationship before? So this was all sudden to me."

"Yeah, I know. You are not the one that should be apologizing. It was me who rushed things up. I mistook our experience for something else, and just... I just want to say that let's not let this thing break our friendship. I want us to be how we always were..."

"Mahi," I said, making her pause. "Let's go out after class. Just you and me. On a date."

She blushed so intensely at that second. The whole day, we did time pass during our lectures. I mean, I know that I wanted to study hard, but it was just as important to take breaks. But wait. Was my dream still to get into AIIMS for Sanika? It was just too soon to conclude anything.

After the class, we both snuck out with minimum interaction with anyone. Mahi had covered up by telling her mother about an extra class by Mr. Patvardhan. When she wished to directly have a talk with him, guess who mimicked his voice. I couldn't believe it worked.

I didn't know why, but I had this urge that I wanted this to be a proper romantic date, like the kind they showed in movies. So, I took her to an amazing restaurant that I knew.

She hesitated at first, insisting that she didn't have enough money. But I didn't give her a choice after promising to pay her remaining sum from my pocket. Yeah, fortunately, currently I had been expending my savings less. Mahi gave me the liberty to choose the orders for both, for me having visited here a couple times before, and that I was paying most of the bill.

The moment the Aglio Olio pasta arrived, she was left awestruck. And she left me awestruck. It made me so happy seeing her like this. I had almost forgotten all my miseries by just seeing her smile.

"I've always wanted to try this!!" she exclaimed.

"Then you could've just said so. What if I had ordered something else?"

"I trust your taste buds."

I chuckled at her choice of words. Suddenly, I was imagining tasting Mahi. But I shook my head and took the bite of my pasta. It was delicious as always.

"Mahi, tell me, have you ever felt that you have had acted very... immaturely at some point of time and regretted it?"

"Me, and immature?" she slurped her pasta. "Yeah, all the time."

"All the time?"

"Of course. I know that I'm immature. I know that I do something stupid every second. And I even regret it several times."

"But then how do you deal with that feeling?"

"I don't. I just... you know, have sort of accepted it. That I'm immature. And it honestly makes me feel at times that there is nothing wrong in that. Because one cannot fully be mature. There is no thing such as perfection. Instead of repeatedly crying over my stupid actions, I just started to get along with my nature. It is just freer that way. At least, being immature makes me happy, so be it, I guess? I don't know. I sometimes blabber anything. I'm not the best advisor."

I was left frozen for a moment. The way she told... it seemed so joyous. She seemed like a really happy person. I imagined how my life would be if I stopped trying to act mature all the time and let things easy. The feeling was pleasant.

"I don't know what you're going through, but you should just be yourself," she added.

"Thanks. Well, how's the Aglio Olio?"

"Who?"

"The pasta?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, it's really great!!!"

xxxx

It was the next day, that I was leaving Satbeer's house with Kartikeya after the end of his hilarious birthday party. We were headed to the nearest bus stop. But both of my friends had been a bit different.

"Hey, what was up with you two today?" I asked Kartikeya, seemingly lost in his own mind.

"Huh? What? Nothing. Why-why do you ask that?"

"Because you two were... sort of third-wheeling me all the time. We didn't have the usual chemistry, of us three. I rather felt separated..."

"Hey, bro, it's nothing like that at all, I swear, okay. I'm sorry if you felt like that. It's just... you know what," he felt silently suddenly, and stopped in his tracks.

He gazed around growing somewhat anxious, and whispered, "There's actually something I want to tell you. But promise me that you wouldn't tell this to anyone. Not even Satbeer."

"What?"

"I... I and Satbeer, you know, are in a... sort of relationship."

"Huh? What the hell are you talking man?"

"I'm gay Varun."

I was shocked for a moment.

"Do you hate me now?"

"What? No! Not at all man!! It doesn't matter to me if you are gay. Our memories and feelings aren't based on that. It's just... So sudden. But, I'm-I'm really happy for you two. Like, hey, what are the chances that I get 2 gay best friends?"

I began to laugh casually to lighten the mood.

"It's actually... I don't know if Satbeer is gay actually. You know, there's this guy. This guy can literally make anyone fall in love with anyone."

"No shit, dude. What the hell are you saying?"

"I'm damn serious. He's called the Matchmaker."

Was it real? Could he make anyone fall in love?

11. Amyra

September, Saturday, 31st

The rendezvous with Vedraj had disrupted my routine. But it was totally worth it. This made me ultimately hurry for college. So somehow adjusting my plaits, I got on my father's bike, and checked my appearance on the mobile only to get scolded by my old man.

So I had to look at it after I was dropped. I already wasn't any of a model, so I had to assure that I looked my best. As I rushed to the building, I noticed a queue around the office.

"Hey, what's this about?" I asked Dhriti there.

"They are distributing journals. Remember? They told yesterday to bring 1500 in cash only?"

Damn. I had forgotten all about that due to the hurry. And I obviously didn't have 1500 rupees, in cash, lying in my bag.

"I... I forgot."

"Uh-oh. They had told last week that they were about to give important practical notes today. But I guess you can just copy them in your notebook and fill the journals later?"

"It seems so."

But that task wasn't any cakewalk. Plus, the notes might not be well organized or copied in the book as they would be in the journal. I let out a sigh and retired to the class, for I didn't want to waste my time rewriting something instead of studying. On the way, I noticed that the classroom in the corner was stocked with journals. I approached it to get a closer look. There were journals on every bench in stacks, and there wasn't anyone around.

I trod ahead and opened one of the journals. It wasn't even that fancy. Just like a regular notebook. My sight fell onto the cost printed on its backside. It was concealed with some sort of black ink. I examined the other journals too, and finally concluded that there was in no way these shitty printouts were worth 1500. This college was seriously looting us!

But what could I do? Everyone had to protest against it for something to happen. So there was nothing I could do. I was about to return, just when a voice interrupted.

"Are you about to swipe them?"

"What? No, no!! I was... just looking, I swear!"

"Why are you so surprised? I'm no guard. You can just pick them up if you want to. I'm no snitch," Vedraj added.

"Why would I do that? That's just... wrong."

"Yeah, but I assume you saw those blacked out costs. The college isn't any saint either."

"But... it just feels wrong. It is not the right way."

Vedraj sighed, and just then Nischay and Irrfan joined him.

"Hey, the coast seems clear. Let's quickly get on with it," Nischay reported.

Vedraj nodded, and they crept into the room and started to put a few journals into their bags.

"You are seriously doing this?! Are you crazy?"

All three of them shushed me, so I contained myself.

"There are cameras around here, you know," I remarked.

"The pile is already so large that I bet they won't even realize that some have gone missing. I suggest you sack some too. C'mon, I guarantee you. I'm well versed in these situations. Not that I'm a regular robber," Vedraj insisted.

His words made me ponder over it. But it just seemed too risky. And I was a teacher's daughter after all. How would that make me look? What if people got to know that 2 teachers had raised a street mugger?

"There is no time to fret, Amyra. Anyone can walk up now. Trust me, just put those in your bag. Stop being a sissy. Sometimes, the world gets twisted, so you have to stop walking on the straight path and twist a little too."

I didn't know if it was the way he said, or because it was Vedraj, but that got me. I immediately squeezed a stack in my bag, and followed the boys out. We swiftly crept inside our classroom, and took seats like nothing had happened. It was seriously thrilling. I had never at all grabbed even someone's pen without asking.

Maybe Vedraj was right, or maybe he was wrong. My conscience still wasn't completely clear. But it definitely was fun. Doing that with Vedraj really made my day. In the midst of this, I hadn't at all realized that I had taken seat right besides him.

"That was awesome, guys!! They totally deserved it," Irrfan murmured.

"Uhh... I'm sorry, I'll just go and sit somewhere else," I quickly muttered.

"What? No, I don't have any problem. Sit here," Vedraj replied.

I had never ever sat next to a boy before. Maybe a couple times during some activities in the middle school, but no major interactions. This was new to me, and so rapid and unexpected, yet so exciting. So I didn't move. Instead, I just burst into a laughter.

After I could breathe, I spoke, "This was seriously... something else."

Vedraj returned me the grin.

"I told you."

"But don't you feel fear?"

"Fear? I don't know... I've done far many things throughout my life that I've just got accustomed to the thrill. A person should be always able to challenge their fear. Never let anyone or anything get the better of you. If you keep that thought itself in your mind, your fear will vanish automatically."

That felt a lot encouraging, especially from his mouth.

"Thanks for helping me," I shyly uttered.

"There is no need to thank me. You did it all yourself. But I'm really proud that you did that, you know. Toppers usually are too timid and studious. Often forget to get a life. Not everything is in those fucking books. Somethings need to be learnt from the harsh outer world."

He was so hot. So strong and rebellious. I always dreamed for such a rowdy type of a boyfriend. But I had never imagined that I would even get to talk to one.

"I... I want to tell you something," I spat. "I really, admire you. I... I like you!!"

I managed to quickly get over with it without gathering any attention from sides. Vedraj stared at me with a blank face for a moment, making me anxious of his answer.

"You know what," he continued. "I do too."

I was literally about to die of a heart attack. This was utterly impossible. Straight out of a fairytale. That Matchmaker was amazing!!

"Tomorrow's Sunday. How about we go somewhere nice for a date?"

"Tomorrow? On a Sunday? My parents won't let me get out of the house!!"

He suddenly chuckled, "Who said anything about permission? You really are too compliant, you know. Live a bit according to your own will. Parents will always try to control you."

"But its my parents!! They just won't allow me to even step out without first checking thoroughly the reason that I give them. And I'm really bad at lying."

"Don't worry, darling. I'll have the best scheme prepared."

xxxxxxx

The next day, I had been revising whatever was taught over the week. Doing this was so effective that it almost made it fit into my subconscious. Suddenly, my buzzing phone snapped me out of my trance.

"Offer to take the suit to the laundry," Vedraj had texted.

"Huh?"

Just then, I could hear an uproar from my living room. I decided to check it out, and discovered my parents furious over something.

"Who the hell were those kids? And how are they playing football? How does a football come this high!!" my father yelled.

"I don't know, they all scampered away before I could even identify them," my mother replied.

In her hands was my father's suit that he wore to his work everyday. It usually hung in the balcony. And it had a really big dark brown splotch on it, evident of a football. I immediately realized that Vedraj's message was no coincidence. But I was too afraid to do anything. What if my parents found it all out? How could I just lie to them?

"Amyra? Can you please go quickly and drop it by the laundry?" my father himself announced. "I'll need it by the next morning for the college."

"Yeah, sure."

Okay, everything was alright. I was doing nothing wrong. I was simply obeying my parents own commands. I exited my building and was out onto the road. I was a sincere girl. But all that sincerity vanished from my soul when Vedraj came into my view. He and his friends were on their respective motorcycles, Irfan behind him carrying a muddied football.

"So, it worked, huh?" he uttered.

"It... it was you guys who did this? Are you insane? My dad has to wear it tomor..."

"Hey, hey, relax. We'll give it to the best laundry I know."

"But my parents will find it suspicious if I don't give it to our regular laundry."

"Just tell them that it is closed. Besides, you won't get the time if you go to your regular laundry."

I was puzzled, and I just stared blankly at his face. But he wasn't in the mood to answer. He insisted that we hurry for now, lest someone familiar might witness this. Irfan quickly hopped off.

"Get on. Now!"

His words really had some power. My legs started to just move on their own and I sat behind him. He raced the bike really fast, so you understand that I had to clutch on to him. His friends weren't following us anymore. We were on our own.

And it wasn't only the bike that was racing. My heart was thumping double its normal rate. Not just from the excitement, but also from the worry of my parents. I had never ever gone out like this without informing them. Even the thought just scared me.

After a while, we finally arrived at a laundry a little distant in my locality. Vedraj took the suit from me and submitted it to the counter, and even finished with the payment himself.

"Tell your parents that your regular was closed so you had to come here. This way, you can get an excuse to wait out instead of making trips to and fro your house," he stated.

It did really sound practical. The regular laundry was barely farther from my building, so my parents would've found it odd for me to stop by for the entire time.

"Okay. But only for an hour," I agreed.

I dialed my father's number and told him everything as planned. I appeared to be steady, but inside, my neurons were literally hopping like popcorns with the anxiety. I had never lied to my parents before. Maybe a couple times when I didn't want to study for another hour, or the food was salty.

"I have my notes and important videos downloaded so I'll make use of my time well," I added to strengthen their decision in my favor.

"Okay, but don't go wandering away. Stay in the shop and don't interact with strangers. Call me if something is suspicious."

"Yes, dad. Bye," and I hung up.

I was feeling an ultimate level of thrill down my spine. This was completely new to me.

"Now that everything is done, let's go to our destination," Vedraj asserted, and got back on his bike.

This time, it was neither a café nor a restaurant. It was rather a simple street Panipuri stall. But it did have a considerable crowd around it to estimate that it was popular. Yet, Vedraj didn't lead me into the crowd, and instead took me towards the back of the stall.

"Anna!" he greeted the cook.

"Oh, Vedraj bhai!! Welcome, welcome. Come, sit here," he then gestured to his coworker.

The coworker shifted some supplies from a pair of stools stacked over each other to the counter and arranged the stools for us to sit.

"2 special SPDP," Vedraj ordered.

"Of course. Just a few minutes!" the cook replied.

"Sometimes, you need to have good contacts," Vedraj said to me as he winked.

This wasn't the ideal date that I had imagined. But it was something completely different, a characteristic of Vedraj. And that was the very thing that attracted me to him.

"I know this doesn't look that good of a place, but trust me, the SPDP here is just, wow!! You'll cry for more after you taste it," he added.

I smiled, and began staring at my feet, unsure of what to do next. I didn't have much experience in socializing. We stayed quiet like that till the dish came, and just as I took the first bite, I knew Vedraj wasn't lying.

"It's good, right?" he asked, munching on his own.

"The best!!"

"You're so cute when you act nervous," he spoke, making me blush. "But you don't need to be, around me. Did you get that? C'mon, what is a date supposed to be?!"

That was the first time I had been completely free to a boy.

xxxxxx

I also had to give the 60 minutes to the Matchmaker, as per our agreement. I hadn't forgotten that. So, I had lied yet another time another day to my parents that I had to enquire about some problems to the teachers, and so had to wait for an hour. Actually, not just to them. Also to Vedraj. Because I certainly couldn't reveal it to him that I had used someone else to 'make' him love me. And thankfully, he left. He wasn't the studious kind.

The Matchmaker was already present in the classroom that I had messaged him to be in. It was all empty except us. Most of the morning scheduled classes were over, so there were only the bookworms left who scarcely occupied the classrooms.

"Take a seat," he addressed.

He had a notebook in front of him. Surprisingly, his coin was kept beside on the desk as he had a pen in his fingers.

"So, what do I have to do?"

"It'd be better if you pretend to be studying. The faculty roams around, you know."

Listening to his advise, I took out some books, and waited for him to instruct me further.

"All you have to do is to answer whatever questions that I might ask. But the answer must be genuine each time. And I warn you, I can tell when a person is being dishonest. And as per the deal, in compliance will lead to negative consequences."

"Okay, okay, I promise you not to lie," I admitted, wondering what he meant by consequences.

"Good. So your first question is this. Imagine, a beggar approaches you to ask for money. What will you do out of the following? Reprimand them to better options in life or give them a slap."

"What kind of options are that? I'll just give them some money or simply ignore them."

"Those answers are not included in the options. Only choose from the options."

"I... I don't know, it is very odd. I wouldn't want to indulge more with the beggar, but if you ask so, I'll rather reprimand them than hit him."

He began scribbling something in his notebook, which I couldn't make out.

"What would you feel when they approach out of the following? Anger, fear, disgust, sadness or joy?"

"Uhh... joy?"

"You're not answering it with sincerity. You just picked that because it is the only pleasant option. I want you to properly imagine yourselves in the situation and tell me the closest to what you'd feel."

I didn't want to, but I didn't seem to have any other option to get through this without upsetting him.

"Umm... sadness, I guess. For the plight on the poor person."

Scribbling, he continued, "Okay, well enough. Next question. Imagine, the child, or the supposed child, of the person you hated the most was in front of you."

The person I hated the most currently was Mr. Patwardhan. Once after noticing my results, he just goes on to push me further continuously. And not to mention the alienating feeling I get when he uses me as a comparison tool.

"Now tell me, what would you do with that child? Slit their throat with a dagger right at the carotid, or bash their head with a rusty wrench till their brains smush?"

"What? What kind of question is that?!!!"

"Just answer," he said in a grim tone.

"I... I-I would... Oh gosh, I don't know. Maybe I'll just... bash their head."

"How many times?"

"What?!"

"How many times would you do it? Just pick the first number that satisfies your feeling."

12. Aruna

October, Monday, 10th

So, my life had started to go very nicely lately. I and Lalit hadn't begun dating officially, but we knew that there was something between us. We had developed a very close bonding. I would always stay after class to study with him. And to be honest, he was a really good teacher. I could understand all the topics that I didn't from the other faculty.

Maybe I should've started paying him instead of our center. But our study session wasn't boring. We always kept it exciting. Sometimes, we played games, like Bingo, Dots, Paper Cricket or Fun Quizzes. Or I showed him some of my favorite YouTube channels, and numerous vloggers that I had subscribed to. And the remaining time, we just talked. About each other.

I had got to know a lot of things about him. Like, he was an only child, and his father was a CA, and wanted him to take the same profession. Lalit rebelled, and finally succeeded in persuading him to let Lalit follow his own dream. But in turn, his father always had high expectations from him, and Lalit never wanted to prove him right in his doubt about Lalit's capabilities.

But before that, in the 10th grade, he had a girl who pretended to be in relationship with him. She acted as if she was really romantically interested in him. But in reality, she only used him for her own benefits, and get better in studies. When the exams were over, she showed her true colors, and began neglecting him.

That was why Lalit usually refrained from talking to any girl. He had serious trust issues, and added to that was his introversion. I also had opened up to him about my long list of boyfriends,

going as far as to age 9 or 10. But he wasn't like any of them. He was totally different. He wasn't just a pastime, or a muse. He was someone I truly liked to be with.

Because, since my childhood, I had learnt only one thing. Boys only wanted lust. They weren't interested in love. They only used the girl, and toyed with her for their enjoyment. So, I decided to be the same to survive emotionally. But after meeting him, everything changed. I got to know that there were some boys, that did want love. And who wanted to be loved back equally.

But right now, it was recess. And recess was girls time. Each of us had agreed to take a break from their relationships during the recess.

"And he asked me whether I would jump in front of a train and die by crushing, or drown in a volcanic lava pool. I said lava pool, because I seriously felt amazed by that, instead of just being a crushed paste," Mahi told.

SK joined in, "Seriously, there's something wrong with that guy. It is a really weird thing to just ask all those nonsense questions for an hour. I'm really curious as to in what way does it benefit him? The other day, he asked me if I'd prefer eating a human liver or kidney!"

"Eww!!" I and Mahi groaned in unison.

"Maybe he's a psychopath, and he's searching for ideas?" I suggested.

"But isn't he already too smart for making people fall in love?" Mahi contradicted.

"Yeah, he is... maybe he's just studying our psyche?"

"If he is, then it's a damn weird way to do it. I've never seen a therapist act such," SK condemned.

Just then, Varun came out of the blue, and surprised all three of us. I was about to protest about it being the girls' time, but before that, he handed Mahi a lively yellow Chafa flower. Then, without saying anything, he just slunk back and out of the class. Mahi's face contrasted with the flower and turned bright red.

"Wish my boyfriend did that," SK commented.

"Oh yeah, tell us a little about that. What's up with you and your ex?" I hastily asked.

"How many times have I told you to stop calling him 'ex' now? He's now my one and forever."

Both me and Mahi fake coughed.

"Shut up!! We meet daily near my society in the evening. I tell my parents that I'm with Neha, my friend, and she covers for me if contacted."

"And what is Neha actually doing all the while?"

"She's with her own fling. We are in a symbiotic relationship. We cover for each other mutually."

"Damn. Everyone is really horny these days," Mahi mentioned. "By the way, Aruna, what did MM ask you?"

"Oh, no-no. Actually, I haven't visited him yet," I replied.

"Not yet? Bro, didn't you hear that part where he says 'not one second later than a week'? Or did he not tell you?" SK spoke.

"Yeah, he did say something like that, I guess. So what? I'll go to him one day. But right now, I'm a little busy in my progress with you know who."

"Haven't you confessed yet?" SK continued.

I shyly shook my head. SK simply nagged me to go for it, whereas Mahi was on a different page.

She expressed, "You better not take MM lightly, Aruna. He doesn't seem like a man to be messed with. I don't trust his... aura."

I chuckled for a moment, "Or what do you think he'll do? Kill me? Rape me? Dude is just skin and bones. And who does he have with him? He's just a nobody. Don't worry, I'll go to him this week. Ooh, and I almost forgot!! Are you guys coming to the party tomorrow? Please!!"

Both of them gave mild sighs.

"Aruna, I can't. You know there's a test coming, right? I'm already short in my study time because of Navneet," SK blurted.

"And you know my mom. I can't come even if I wanted to," Mahi whined.

I rolled my eyes in disappointment but just accepted the fate. Yes, I did have a lot many other friends who would accompany me. But besties were besties. Nothing compared to them. Not even Lalit. Speaking of whom, I still had to ask him.

That day after class, we both were studying chemistry. And having our own, of course.

"And that's how the free energy of adsorption is negative," Lalit explained.

"Ohh... so the delta H just needs to be more negative than T delta S," I asserted, to which he nodded.

"Phew, another chapter over," I wiped off the sweat on my forehead.

This seemed to be the perfect chance to start the topic. Lalit was packing his bag, when I began.

"Hey, you know, there's a friend of mine near my house, and he just got accepted in his dream college. So, he's throwing a rooftop party tomorrow. Would you come with me?"

Lalit didn't seem excited, surprised or angry. He was just blank. But I knew it was his way of subtle disapproval.

"Please," I pleaded with my puppy dog eyes.

"Aruna, you know that we have a test soon, right?"

"There are always tests!! But how many times there is a rooftop party?"

Yeah, they might be common in the Western society, but in India, they were kinda rare.

"And because of you, I've started to take study this seriously. Then can't you do this for me? It's just one time!! I won't insist again!"

Lalit stared at the desk, apparently making up his mind. He then suddenly turned towards me.

"But I wouldn't know anybody except you. Would I fit in?"

I was so glad at his response. I was practically jumping inside at his partial agreement.

"Of course you would. Whose friend are you? I'll make sure that no one ignores you."

"Oh, easy there, miss popular. I don't want to be the center of attention."

"Yes, of course!! You know what I mean!!!"

We then both laughed heartily. After some more gossiping and hang out, we took to leave. While treading through the corridor, I caught a glimpse of the Matchmaker in one of the classrooms. He was in the midst of other studying kids, gesturing to me towards his watch on his wrist. I gave him a slight nod and went ahead. I would go to him later. For tomorrow, I was going to be busy with the party.

xxxxxx

I had my black off shoulder one piece on one side of the bed, and a hot pink crop top and dark blue jeans on the other.

"Off shoulder or crop?" I asked my besties, panning my mobile across my room for them to see.

"The off shoulder obviously!!" cried SK.

Her video told me that she was somewhere outside, probably with her ex. Sorry, current.

"No, no, the pink crop top is the best!!" yelled Mahi.

She was on her bed, in her domestic avatar, and the noises of her mother yelling at her sister were audible.

"Shut up, Mahi. The off shoulder is obviously better!!" SK argued.

"Uh-uh. The pink crop is totally hot. I'm sure Lalit will drool at its sight."

"No, it's not!! Black is just..."

"Shut up you 2!!" I interrupted. "I'll just go with the velvet jumpsuit."

"The hell? If you had already decided, then why bother asking us?" Mahi groaned.

"I just wanted to test your fashion sense, and you both failed. Now goodbye, I have a party to attend to," saying, I cut the call.

Then, I donned the jumpsuit, and applied some foundation, blush and a rosy lip gloss. I had also styled my hair in a wavy fashion. When I looked in the mirror, I almost fell in love with myself. I couldn't see how Lalit could resist this. Fawning over myself, I waited for Lalit's call. He was coming via rickshaw, while for me, the destination was merely the building across.

Soon enough, when he notified me of his presence, I rushed outside. I discarded the long list of message notifications that covered my screen. I think the one at the top was of the Match Maker. Whatever, I didn't have time for anyone else right now.

I had told my parents the truth about the party. Because the host lived close to me, my parents were used to him, and didn't object. Such opportunities were like striking gold for Indian girls.

After looking around for the slenderman of my dreams, I finally spotted him. He was standing across the road, clad in a blue T-shirt and black casuals. I beckoned him to stay where he was, as the destination was right behind him.

"Aww, you look so cute," I praised, pinching his cheek.

He slapped my hand away, "I've promised my parents to be home before 10."

"Before 10? I don't know, no promises!"

"Yeah, I'll see that," he sulked, and we began heading to the building.

As we got into the elevator, we both had grown quiet.

Suddenly, Lalit uttered, "You're looking pretty."

This caused me to blush and return a heartwarming smile to Lalit. As we reached the top floor, the ambience replaced the silence. There were people everywhere, and music was in the air. Lalit seemed a little nervous.

"You okay?" I asked him.

"Yeah. Just first time going to such a party."

"Don't worry. No one's gonna eat you!"

Just then, I came across the host himself.

"Oh, Aruna, you're finally here!!"

"Hey, Joshi!!" I gave him a friendly hug.

But this seemed to stir jealousy in Lalit. How cute!!

"Congrats on getting into IIT, my buddy!!"

"Thanks!! And who's this friend of yours?" he looked at Lalit.

"He's Lalit. He is my... boyfriend," that was unplanned.

Lalit looked at me in surprise.

"Welcome, Aruna's bf. Please enjoy yourselves in here. There's music, food and everything. Prerna and the others are at the opposite corner," Joshi shook Lalit's hand and went to meet some other guest.

"Why did you tell him I was your boyfriend?" Lalit questioned.

"Don't you want me to?"

Lalit was about to protest, but silenced. He then gave a shy grin. I took a hold of his arm, and began to drag him with me.

"Come, I'll introduce you to my friends that live around."

On my way, I greeted a couple of known faces.

"These are so many friends," Lalit remarked.

"Oh, these are nothing... There are more."

We finally reached the corner, where a clique was standing.

"Hey, look who's here!!" one of them squealed.

"Hi everyone. Ok, so look here. This is Perna, this one's Swati. And this is Ramesh, and that's Manik."

They all varied in ages. Perna was a year younger, Swati and Ramesh a year older, and Manik was in the third year of his college.

"And who's this mister?" Ramesh asked, pointing at Lalit.

But before I could say anything, Lalit spat, "I'm her boyfriend! Lalit Srivastav!"

It was a bold attempt, but it rather sounded too formal. Everyone burst into laughter, and Ramesh introduced himself properly by grabbing his hand.

Lalit was a little quiet and reluctant, but all the while, I made sure that he talked something. This gradually made him mix with everyone else. And frankly, he seemed a lot more cheery. Being amiable was just a great feeling. I read somewhere that socially active people lived longer.

"Hey, guys, the pizzas are here!!" Joshi announced. "But don't flock. They will be neatly arranged on the table and each person will get them."

As we each took a slice and were munching, Manik came with some bottles.

"Guys, look what I've got. Wine."

"Cool!! C'mon everyone, get their cups!" Ramesh exclaimed.

As we all started to get the drink, Lalit caught my arm.

"Hey, what's all this? We're not that old to be drinking wine."

"Oh, c'mon Lalit. It's not like we're murdering someone. Everyone does a little illegal stuff all the time. Even watching free movies on the web is illegal. It's not like we're doing this daily. It's just one time. Live a little," I tried to convince him.

"Yeah, dude. Wine isn't that alcoholic. Don't worry, everyone around here is sipping," Ramesh added.

Lalit seemed a little hesitant earlier, but after taking a glass, it seemed to reduce. The drink was really bitter, but the feeling was just awesome. It just lightened my whole mind. Reduced all the tension. I felt lighter and happier.

Soon enough, everyone began to dance at the middle. Our clique also decided to join, and this time, I didn't need to request Lalit to join. He trailed voluntarily.

"C'mon boy, move that body
Cause tonight I'm naughty, naughty," the song boomed.

We were all dancing in our own style, when, I don't know who initiated it, but me and Lalit were soon holding hands and trying couple dancing. And it was really difficult when you were drunk.

"We go wild, we're in safari."

Suddenly, at a moment, both of us pulled each other too close to each other. I could stare into his soul through his eyes. I wasn't intoxicated by the wine. I was intoxicated by his love. But before anything could happen between us, we both handled ourselves and pulled each other back.

Exhausted, I pulled Lalit with me towards the ledge.

"Oh, this is really fun, I have to accept," Lalit expressed.

I wasn't even sure how many cups we had downed by now. I gave him a light shove.

"Mr Solemn knows how to enjoy," I said.

"Oh, yes. And Ms Popular knows how to make people enjoy," he pushed me back.

"Yes, I do know how to spoil nerds!" I shoved him again.

"I'm not a nerd!! You're a damn playgirl!" he pushed yet again.

We just both chuckled, and I gave him another push. Laughing, he came back towards me, and this time, pushed a little too hard. I toppled straight over the ledge behind me, and was in the air.

I didn't realise for a moment that I was falling off of a 12 storey building. And when the ground came, it hit really hard, blacking out everything.

13. SK

October, Wednesday, 12th

"I don't know what really happened. They just told me that some classmate pushed her off the rooftop," I sobbed on my phone. "He's currently in police custody, but my parents said that all the kids were intoxicated or something..."

"So they were drunk?" Navneet asked from the other end.

"It seems so. I don't know... She wasn't that sort of a person, but she was always kinda unpredictable, so maybe. I just, I can't believe that something like this could happen. I'm just so scared... I don't know what to do. I don't know what to feel."

My face was completely drowned in tears. I collapsed into my bed, sinking my face into the pillow.

"Just let it all out. You're allowed to feel whatever you're feeling. It's... Okay."

"I... I will call you later," I hung up.

I did contact Navneet to feel better, but his consolation didn't seem to be working as expected. I was constantly searching for a way to escape this, but I couldn't. This was the harsh reality. Aruna was dead. They said her whole body was splattered all across the ground. I couldn't bear it anymore and puked right there on the bed.

xxxxxx

It had been several days since her funeral. Her body was in such a gruesome state, that the image will be forever scarred into my mind. The center would have some unusual silence than earlier, or maybe it was all in my head. But the classes didn't feel exactly as exciting as before. At times, I would stupidly wait for Aruna to come and take her seat beside me, before I would suddenly snap back to reality.

"I've never seen Lalit since that day," I remarked.

"Yeah, me too. I've heard rumors that he is confined in some mental institution or juvenile detention center," Mahi asserted.

"I always told that idiot to not fool around too much. But Aruna was Aruna. And look where it got her..."

"Shhh... it's enough now. Let's not talk about it anymore. Anyway, have you heard the new BTS album?"

"Of course. What else do I have to keep myself sane? Lately, I just sit in the balcony in the peace of night, and listen to..."

Suddenly, my mobile started to ring. It was Navneet. I had just texted him this morning before class. And we had agreed to keep the recess as the girls time.

Nevertheless, I picked it up, "I'm at the class right now."

"Yeah, I know. Just tell me your Insta password. It says you changed it."

"Why do you want it now?"

"Just... To keep it logged on my mobile. I thought we agreed on this?"

"But can't this wait? I'm busy right now, so I'll call you later."

I just hung up his call. Didn't even listen to his reply. I was in no mood to deal with this.

"You guys share Insta?" Mahi weirdly reflected.

"Yeah... does it seem odd? Don't you and Varun do such things?"

"No... well, we know some of each other's passwords, but we don't actively keep logged into each other's. But hey, I don't mean it's odd. You're both totally free to do things your way."

I gave a shrug. Just then, Kshitija patted my arm.

"Hey, I think that's your mother. She's gesturing at you," she pointed towards a lady standing in the doorway of our classroom.

"That's weird. No faculty told me anything about a personal parent meeting."

"Uh-oh. This usually means something bad. Good luck," Kshitija caressed my back as I left.

I went towards the lady in green floral saree. I didn't start talking immediately, and instead requested her to move towards a corner.

"Why are you here so suddenly?" I whispered, making sure that no special attention was falling upon us.

"Your physics sir called me. Let's just visit him, and you'll get your answers."

I gulped in my anxiety, and continued to the staff room. All of our faculties were present there, as it was recess anyways. My mother slowly budged the door.

"May I come in, sir?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, yes come in. I take you are Mrs. Sivakumar?" Mr. Patvardhan spoke in his most courteous tone.

My mother nodded. He offered us some prearranged vacant chairs.

"I know this is a little abrupt, Srikanya. But I thought it would be better this way. Mrs. Sivakumar, please take a look at this."

He then turned his laptop screen towards us to see. It was my current year's report.

"As you can see, she has a considerable drop in the marks lately. And I can understand why it is so. You've gone under a very traumatic incident, that I pray doesn't befall to any student ever. It is natural to be stressed and distracted after such events. But the thing is, that time always keeps moving forward. People who are gone are gone and you won't get them back. But what you can get is your whole future.

Don't let the past destroy your future. You're a very smart person, Srikanya. I bet if you work hard, you can surely get into an AIIMS. But for that, you've to accept the reality and move on. Mrs. Sivakumar, I request you to look after her a little and I suggest therapy might be useful, if you both feel like so. Adolescence is a very critical time in one's life, and thus one should take special care of it."

Some further discussion took place between me and my mother before she took her leave. This incident further increased my study stress, leading me to stay distracted throughout the next lecture. When it was finally over, I was overjoyed to leave. After exiting the building, I met a familiar face in the compound.

"Oh, hey Amyra!! What's up?"

"Hi. Nothing, just the usual studies."

"Hey, tell me one thing. How do you manage to get such good marks despite being in a relationship with the baddest boy in the center?"

"It's simple. I set strict boundaries. Study time is study time and dating time is dating time. No compromises. Because, for me, if I truly love someone, then I don't see any problem in giving each other some space. You know that they'll always love you. Only insecure people always stick to their partners... At least that's what I believe."

"Wow. That was profound."

That was when I realized. It wasn't because of the trauma. I mean, it surely did have a role to play, but it wasn't the major reason. Mahi, Varun and many others had to undergo the same anguish as me, but they didn't seem to suffer from any such thing.

I thought that the actual cause was Navneet. Even before Aruna's death, I had started to spend a lot of time texting and talking to him, that I struggled in managing time for my studies. And lately, due to the traumatic stress, I interacted with him even more. It was time for me to organize my life a little. I had to cut back a little on the enjoyment and focus on my goals seriously.

xxxxxx

It was a usual evening a few days later. And it was the time for my usual meeting with Navneet. I was just dressing up, when the bell suddenly rang. In a moment, my mother came into my room.

"Are you going out?" she asked me.

"Yeah. It's 5."

"Would you postpone it a little? Uncle Venkat and his family are here."

"What? But you didn't tell me anything about it before!"

"We didn't know either. They were around and decided to drop by."

"But what have I got to do? You and dad continue to meet them, and I'll go to my business."

"Srikanya, it will look so rude. It has already been a long time since we've met. And I'm not telling you to sit here the whole day. Just have a few conversations with them."

I knew I couldn't win a debate with my mother, so I gave in. Uncle Venkat was my father's first cousin. He and his wife, Aunt Shalini, his mother Laxmi, and their daughter Mandakini, who was older than me, were seated in our living room with my father and brother hospitalizing them.

We gave each other mutual smiles, as I took a seat across them.

"Wow, Srikanya has grown so much since the last time we saw her! She looks so pretty now!" Aunt Shalini gleamed.

I returned a shy thanks.

"We were in Pune for Shalini's brother's Vastushanti of their new bungalow, and so decided to pay you a visit. It's been long," Uncle Venkat said to my father.

"Of course, of course. You can drop by whenever you want, this is just like your own home!!" my father tried to be courteous.

I just hoped that they didn't consider moving in after that declaration. Just then, my mobile started to ring. It was Navneet. I declined the call and kept the mobile facedown beside me. The relatives and my family continued to engage in casual conversations.

"So, what is Srikanya doing nowadays?" Uncle asked at one moment.

"I... I'm currently studying for NEET."

"NEET? Oh my god, that is such a tough exam!" Uncle gasped as if it was something about the Mafia.

"You know, our Mandakini had also opted to study for it," my Aunty began telling my mother, "But she felt it to be extremely hard, and thus ended up going for law. Are you sure that Srikanya could do it? Best to keep a back up ready. How much percentage did she get in 10th and 11th grades?"

And there, ladies and gentlemen, was the one question that annoyed the fuck out of every Indian teen. We mustn't have met over a year. Then why did this bitch had so much interest in my life? And why did she have to go on giving her own opinions? I didn't remember asking her for them.

At the very moment, something tiny plopped into my balcony suddenly. I assumed it were the pigeons. They often flew around with things for their nests and dropped them in our open balcony.

"She had 91 in 10th and 86 in 11th," my mother blurted.

"Ah, see!! I'm telling you, be prepared. Don't take this lightly. Check other streams too, and be open in considering to change it to them. We did the same with Mandakini and shifted her to

law. Her friend had gone for NEET and she went into depression after not getting the desired result."

Something plopped yet again in the balcony. Maybe the birds were a little tipsy.

"It's actually because my college is tied up with my classes, so I didn't have to worry much about the 11th percentage. I only have to attend it once a week," I interjected.

"Once a week? What kind of silliness is this?"

This woman was now getting on my nerves. When something fell into the balcony yet again, my mother noticed it along with me. She quietly ordered my brother to check it out.

After a while, he came to me, and whispered, "There's a boy. He's calling for you."

Navneet. I immediately got up, and pretended to merely stroll into the balcony. Upon reaching the railing, I saw him standing below by a tree.

He spotted me, and asked me when was I coming through gestures. I replied him in the same manner that it wasn't possible for me anymore. He began asking the reason, and I was finding it difficult to communicate. So, I simply gestured him to go away.

"What's the matter?" my father asked from inside.

"Nothing."

As I took my seat, I felt grandmother Laxmi grimace at me.

"See, how your girl dresses, Nanda. You should teach her properly. It's not good to show so much skin. A girl should know her limits," she spat.

This was too much for me now.

"Who the hell are you to tell me that, hag?" I mumbled out.

And whatever happened next was pretty obvious. Indian parents were really strict and conservative, especially mine, and they took such matters very seriously and harshly.

Sometime later, I had managed to smuggle out my mobile with the help of my brother. It was often confiscated as a punishment. And it had become a basic necessity for me lately.

The first thing I noticed was Navneet's message. He was genuinely pissing me off.

"What's the matter?" it said.

"Couldn't you just fucking wait?" I typed back.

He came online soon after, and our talk began.

"I did. For a lot of time. But you weren't picking up my calls."

"So what? What might happen if I don't pick up your call for one day? I had guests over so I couldn't talk with you then. Are you that dumb to not understand simple things like these?"

"You could've warned me earlier about the situation! How was I supposed to know?"

"I couldn't! They just showed up spontaneously. If my parents had caught you calling me on the mobile or the balcony, do you know how bad it would have gotten? They wouldn't have let me even leave the apartment!!"

"I'm... I'm sorry. I just didn't know what to do. I was this... all excited to meet you and this happened."

"I think we went over this. I need to focus more on my studies. Why aren't you occupying yourselves with things too?"

"What things? Like cricket? You do know what it causes to me, right? It just separates us!"

"So then would you just leech onto me? I have a life of my own too, Navneet!! I'm not just a bum like you!! I have to study hard for NEET!"

"I thought we had a life together."

"You're a complete moron, you Navneet!! You have no individuality left. You don't have that passion left in you that you had for achieving something in cricket."

"But wasn't that the reason why we broke up."

"That was also the reason that attracted me to you in the first place. The drive that you had for pursuing things and trying to accomplish something. But now, you're just nothing except a tag along. Constantly sticking to me."

"Please don't say that."

"You know what, I want this to end. Whatever we have, it was better when we didn't."

"Are you serious? Are you dumping me over text?"

"Yes, I am. Now don't fucking message me again!"

I instantly blocked him from all platforms, and threw my mobile away on the bed.

I understood it all now. That was exactly the reason why we had broken up. I was an idiot to think that it was a mistake. I simply couldn't live like that. I needed to live life my way, and I couldn't let Navneet control it in anyway.

I had my own dreams, and it was not Navneet. He was just an adolescent distraction. I allowed my mind to wander and fall into the teenage traps. But, now it was time for me to come back to senses. I didn't need Navneet. At all.

xxxxxx

The class was over, and as usual, we were headed to the parking lot to get our cycles. Mahi had already parted ways to go with Varun, Kshitija headed to hail a rickshaw, and Vrushali's father was already waiting for her in their car.

As I drove my bike outside the gate, someone blocked my path ahead.

"Navneet? Why are you here?"

"Let's just talk it all out," he uttered desperately.

"There is nothing to talk, Navneet. I told you, that I don't want anything with you. It's over."

"But I can't!! I can't live without you, SK!"

"Yes, you can!! You did once, when you had something to fight for. But now, you're just a useless, needy person."

"Please, listen to me SK. We can still fix all of this..." his words trailed as I rode away.

Throughout my ride home, I gave a thought on the matter. Navneet had began to become a pain in the ass, and he didn't seem ready to leave me. I then reminisced the first meeting with the Matchmaker. He had stated that he could make a person develop an interest in another. But this was just too much. If I had to get out of this, I had to had a talk with him.

14. Varun

October, Wednesday, 5th

Her lips were so sweet. I could taste all of her gloss and tongue. This was the first time I had ever kissed. And hers too. That's why, I didn't care whether we were doing it wrong. I had pulled her close enough to leave no space between us. She was caressing my hair from behind the back. There was no one around at the backside of the center.

Suddenly, I started to imagine how Sanika's mouth would taste. I didn't know why, but it just came into my mind and distracted my whole pleasure. Moreover, my mobile beeped with a notification. I checked it, and it was Sanika. I instantly broke away from Mahi.

"Hey, listen, I need to go," I excused.

"Now?" she asked, disappointed.

"Yeah. My father has called me urgently. Sorry. But you taste really well."

I didn't stop to witness her blushing and immediately bolted away. I went at a distance from the center, to make sure I wasn't visible to Mahi. At once, I took out my mobile and opened the DMs.

"Hey. I'm sorry, I said a lot."

"No, it's fine. I was the one who acted too immaturely."

"But I should really thank you for standing up like that. It really takes guts. Just, try to be a bit more peaceful now onwards."

"Yes, of course."

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Yeah."

"As I'm leaving tomorrow... Can you come with me today to Tulsibaug?"

It was a famous street market in Pune. And even though it didn't sound like a date, I felt somewhere in my heart that it was something more than a simple hangout."

"Done," I replied, smiling at my fortune.

xxxxxx

That was a date, and it went well. Now, I was in 2 relationships. A long distance one with Sanika. And the other, the casual one, with Mahi. I planned to keep the latter only till the end of the 12th grade, but I wasn't entirely sure. It must've been a month since I had started both of them.

One day, when I was hitting the gym, I received the notification of a message. After completing my bench press set, I picked my mobile to check it out. Mahi.

It read, "You talked about a date sometime. Mom has gone to attend a ceremony, so I can come today."

But before I could reply back, another text slithered above that one. Sanika.

"Videocall today at 7?"

This was puzzling. I was more serious with Sanika, but a date was more interesting than just a usual videocall. Well, if one gave it a bit more thought... Mahi was the one who asked first. And first come, first serve, right?

"Umm... actually, babe, sorry I can't. My father's making me help him set the new furniture up," I lied to Sanika.

"Ohh... um, okay then. Maybe some other time. What you doing rn?"

"Finishing my bench press."

"Ooo... then you better finish that. I want those sexy pecs and triceps when you come to AIIMS. Byeeee."

Next, I confirmed my appointment with Mahi. As soon as I finished my workout, I went to pick her up. This time, it was her who suggested the place. The Sapphire Café. True to its name, it was glowing blue with its incredible lighting. On my way in, I accidentally bumped into another guy because of the narrow doorway. Acting mature, I let him go inside first.

We took a seat in a corner, and ordered a margherita pizza and cheesy fries. But Mahi didn't look as lively as our other dates. She was rather a little silent, and I noticed her often staring and touching her necklace.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Oh... nothing, it's just... this necklace," she held it properly for me to see.

It wasn't too fancy. Just a cheap silver-painted copy with either a leaf or a spade at the bottom. I don't think I need to describe what was further below that.

"What is it?" I queried, noticing the strange misery in her eyes.

"Aruna gave it to me. On my birthday. She had forgotten about it totally, but she still rushed out of the center in mid-recess, arguing with the faculty and the guard, and finally came back with this. So, every time I see this, I get reminded of her. But I'm not sure what to do. I feel like I should get rid of it, because it probably isn't healthy to attach onto the past like that. Yet, if I throw it away, I might forget all the memories and feelings about her. I'm confused."

She was almost teary now. I held her hands to comfort her.

"Hey, it's okay. You know what, I'll tell you one story. My father had stayed in only one house all his life till his adolescence. But one day, his father's, that is, my grandfather's transfer letter came in, and they had to shift to Nashik. He was instantly heartbroken. He thought that he would miss all the memories and friends he had in that house. He was so depressed that he refused to eat for one whole day.

But of course, controlling hunger for a teenager isn't that easy. And in those times, parents used to be really strict. So, they finally made him go with them, and he had to leave his house. The first few days at the new place, he was sad that he was going to be cut off from his childhood. But soon enough, he got used to it, and eventually came out of his depression.

Do you know what he realized? He realized that he didn't actually forget any of his past memories. They always stayed with him. He would often contact his old friends and even meet them occasionally. Plus, he began making new memories at the new place. It was just his fear of losing that had made him feel like that."

Mahi seemed to be listening intently.

"People will always come and go, Mahi. We have to keep moving on to survive. These things, they are just materialistic. They don't have anything special in themselves. What makes them special is our memories with them. And those memories, if they are really that strong, always stay in our hearts till death. So, I'd suggest that you don't completely get rid of the necklace and instead keep it somewhere safe."

I could see the emotions flow on Mahi's face. She was deeply touched. Maybe she wanted to reach me and hug me, but the table didn't allow her to.

"Let's just focus on the date now. I remember you said yesterday that you were going to tell me something that happened at your house."

"Oh yeah!!" she cried. "This really funny thing happened with Kavya."

xxxxx

The next morning, when I switched on my Wi-Fi in the mobile, a long list of messages filled in. Each one was from Sanika. She had sent me some image. I opened it, and was shocked. It was a photo of me and Mahi holding hands at the café yesterday. Taken from the side view.

"One of my friends sent this to me." "What is all this?? You told me you had to help your dad!" "Who's this girl?" "Have you been cheating on me all the time?" "Answer me, you jerk!!"

It then all hit me. The guy that I had bumped into while entering. I did feel that he was familiar, and now I recognized that I had seen him a couple of times with Sanika. Shit, this was messed up.

"It's not how you think. She's family, a cousin."

"Cousins don't hold hands like that. And I pretty much know your extended family."

That was true.

"Sanika, I swear to God, there is nothing like that in between us. You know that I love you. Don't you trust me?"

"I do trust you. That's why, I know when you're lying. When did you start cheating? Or are you cheating on her with me too?"

I figured to just tell her the truth. After all, she had the Matchmaker's magic, right? She wouldn't just break me off like that.

"Okay, to be honest, Sanika, I was two timing you. I know this is wrong, and I'm really sorry about it. But she's just a timepass. The thing that is between you and me can never be between that girl and me."

"Timepass? Are you comparing me to a job or something, in the middle of which, if you get bored, you can have a little pass time? Is this how you think of people? Don't you have some sense of loyalty?!"

"It happens in the teenage years!! I was just exploring, having fun. But I swear, I have some serious connection with you. These trivial girls don't mean anything in front of you!"

"Then you wouldn't have gone to her in the first place!! Fuck you, Varun!! You're just a selfish, self centric asshole!! I'm so ashamed that I failed to see this in you despite knowing you for your whole life. FUCK. YOU!"

I texted a bit more, but she wasn't reading them. Soon enough, the chat and call were blocked. It scared me a little, yet I knew that the Matchmaker must have had it all covered. The deal was to let her fall in love with me, so I believed that she would be back to me in due course of time. Thus, I waited for the day. Nothing happened.

Another day passed, and still there was no sign of Sanika trying to reach me. And yet another. Now it had me worrying. I attempted to contact her, but she either blocked or neglected me completely. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. The Matchmaker had promised me that she would love me. It was time for us to have some talk. I messaged him to meet me, and he immediately responded.

As I came to the meet up spot, right behind my society, he was already leaning against a tree with another peculiar dress-up. And that coin waving through his fingers really annoyed me. He never seemed to stop playing with it. His face bore a solemn expression as always. I complained to him about my predicament. He sniggered after listening.

"You mistake my words, Varun. I had never guaranteed the target to 'stay in love' with you. I merely stated that the target would tend to grow some more interest in you than usual. People still have their own conscience and volition to decide their course of actions. Understand that I am no magician. What I do is pure art, achieved by complex techniques and cognition. And just as every other art, mine too, has its limits."

"Then push your limits some more!! I'll give you anything that you wish, just make her love me!!" I whined.

"Listen, my friend. Mind is not a simple paper on which one can scribble anything that they wish. It is the most difficult tool to control, even more difficult than a nuclear reactor. It has its own boundaries and resistances. I can only bend it wherever possible. Rather than controlling, I'll say I merely influence it. If you think that I'm so powerful as to make anyone do anything, don't you think that I would've been a dictator?"

"Then what? What should I do to make everything alright? There must be some way!!"

"Every single thing influences a mind in its own ways. I've reached my limits. But maybe you could do something."

"Like what? Tell me, please!!" I begged.

"That is not in our deal. It is for you to figure out on your own. But I'll give you a tip. Mind isn't satisfied by seeing what actually is, but rather by seeing what it wants to see."

His statement was giving me hope, but I needed to carefully think and plan it all out to succeed. I muttered a quick thanks and turned around to leave. But just then, the Matchmaker caught me by the shoulder.

"Your 60 minutes of this week are still pending. And the time is almost up," he whispered in my ear.

xxxxxx

As a method of waiting out, I once again played the video which was sent to Sanika. It wasn't sent via me, but with the help of my sister Meena's number. The video showed a preview of me and Mahi standing at the back of our center. It began abruptly from the middle of an incident, in order to make it look like it was genuine and not scripted.

"What are you talking about? Are you seriously dumping for some other girl?" Mahi barked.

"She's not just some other girl, okay? She's the girl. The one, and the only. You were the one who was just something. I somehow stupidly fell for your words and started this, but no longer. Now I know that you are just a selfish, manipulative bitch!! You don't love me!! But she does."

"Does she? She's not even here!! I fucking am!! I'm here to do anything for you while she's away pursuing her own frickin' dreams!!"

"So what? Love doesn't have boundaries, especially not distance. It can exist anywhere, everywhere. I don't give a shit about whether you are around or not. I only care about Sanika. Please, just get lost."

Mahi's anger soon transformed into grief, and she stomped away from the view. I turned around and looked at the camera, and stepped towards it to take it from Kartikeya who was holding it.

"Sanika, please listen to me carefully. I have left her for you. And I will gladly leave anything else too. But please just don't abandon me. I made a mistake, but now I've realized. There isn't anyone else like you. What we have, had since several years, cannot be between me and somebody else. Please forgive me this once, Sanika.

I swear to you that I won't repeat this ever again. I know I was so rude the earlier day, but I have changed. People are not like jobs or objects. They are more precious and unique than all those things. So please, just please, take me back."

By this point of time, I had tears in my eyes, and I was kneeling on the ground. The video stopped soon after Kartikeya took back the phone into his hands while I was slapping myself. It wasn't long after which I received Sanika's call.

"Oh, thank God, you called. I have been such a jerk, I deserve every punishment, I know."

"Just promise me one thing, Varun. That this won't ever, ever happen again."

"I swear on my life, on your life, that this won't repeat itself. I've learnt from it, and now I'm a changed person. But please, don't abandon me."

"I won't. I know that we are doing long distance, and it's difficult. But I'm also going through the same condition as you, Varu. And I'm not instantly jumping at other guys. Because I believe if true love exists, it will always find its way back. Please, just for one year, get a hold of yourself."

After a little more talk and reconciliation, we hung up on a good note. A few moments later, Mahi's message slipped in.

"Hey. Did you send the video to the contest?"

"Yeah. If it gets shortlisted, it will appear in their announcement video. I'll share the link once it is uploaded."

I had convinced her to shoot this clip on the pretext of a tragic romantic shorts contest on Youtube. Frankly, it was a real thing, which itself gave me the idea. So there was no reason for Mahi to have any suspicion either.

The Matchmaker was right. Mind is not content with what actually is, but what it wants it to be.

15. Kartikeya

November, Friday, 4th

"You're gay!!" I stiffened at those words.

Like an alert dog, I rotated my neck around to find the source of the voice.

"I'm not gay, you gay!! Your mom's gay!!" the guy replied back to Umesh.

"Yeah she is... in a relationship with your mom!!" Umesh burst laughing after retorting with what he thought to be funny.

But it wasn't. I didn't understand why people had to mock someone using that term. As if meaning it was something derogatory. Just because something wasn't normal didn't mean that it was derogatory.

I shook my head and focused on my notes. I didn't get differentiation at all. I even wondered what use it had in the medical field. I simply flipped the pages like that of a magazine.

"You and studying? Did the sun rise from the west?" Satbeer remarked as he plopped his bag beside me and took his seat.

"More like just staring. This is such a fucked up topic. I'm only looking at it because my parents scolded me real bad the other day."

Satbeer chuckled, "You speak like you're simply studying because of your parents. Don't you want to be a doctor yourself?"

"No."

"Huh?"

"Yeah, you heard it right. It has always been my father's dream. He thinks this is a very respectable and prosperous job."

"Damn... then what do you wish to be?"

I sighed, "What does it matter? It's not going to come true anyways. Better not to talk of imaginary things."

He was about to protest, just when, someone interrupted.

"Hey, what are you 2 lovebirds doing?" Vedraj approached out of nowhere.

"Why do you say that?" I asked, anxious.

"Because you look like a cute couple. Go on, kiss!!"

I was about to lose my calm. I didn't know what I would've done had Satbeer not interjected.

"And you're our son. Call me daddy," he mocked Vedraj.

"Okay daddy, bend down. I want to show you something."

"Oh really? Won't Amyra bhabhi mind?"

Both of them burst into laughter and continued their taunting. I was relieved knowing that Vedraj was only kidding. People had some serious problem here. They didn't realize what was humorous and what wasn't. I was snapped back to reality when I noticed Satbeer calling me.

"You coming to my house today? I mentioned yesterday about that new PlayStation," he offered.

"Oh, yeah, sure. But what about Varun?"

"Mister is busy dating missus."

"Okay, then we'll be busy in us."

"Shh..." Satbeer slapped my arm, blushing for a second.

xxxxx

I was in front of the same gate as the other day. The watchman looked like he was about to block me, but soon seemed to remember and let me in. He eyed me strangely. After speaking on the intercom, a servant opened the door to let me in. He seemed to be acting very comfortably around me.

"In the 3rd room from right," he mentioned casually, as if he actually owned this house.

I removed my shoes and gave him a curt nod before continuing. On my way, in the corridor, I came across Satbeer's mother.

"It's... Kartik, right?" she uttered after a few seconds of contemplation.

"Yes," I responded.

3 letters didn't matter much. Plus I was usually referred to by that name.

"What brings you here?"

"Oh, Satbeer invited me. To play with the PlayStation."

"Oh, is that so? Okay then, be careful with that thing. It's really expensive, you know," she took her leave.

I gazed at her in disgust. Everyone else in this family was so money minded and narcissistic. Because of our lower economic status, we knew to value even simpler things greatly. She was probably one of those who ordered food from outside just because the meal cooked in the house wasn't tasty.

I entered the room, and noticed Satbeer waving something in his hands.

"Oh, you're here? Close the door!" he spoke, still busy in the game.

As I did so and approached closer, I could see a car speeding on the screen. Satbeer bent towards his left side, making the car make a sharp left turn. Despite the efforts, the car crashed on the divider and Satbeer groaned as a game over screen popped up. He then flung a controller towards me, and I grabbed it with caution.

"Do you know how to play?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"It's simple. This is the joystick, you race your car around with it. And this button is for braking and drifting. And this one is for using special powers and nitro booster."

"Okay, pretty much like those on our mobile."

"Yeah, but the coordination is a little different. But you'll get used to it."

Let me tell you this. It was the best thing ever. To play PlayStation 5 with your boyfriend. We both cheered loudly and enjoyed our game. Initially, I lost the rounds. But later I had mastered the controller and proved to be a tough competition to him. The game was also really amazing. It was a whole new experience to play it like this.

At some point of time, someone decided to step into the room.

"Satbeer, what are you guys doing?" his father's voice echoed.

"Playing video games."

"Enough of that. You've been at it for a long time. It's not good for your health. Kids your age should play outside."

Satbeer gave me a gloomy glance, and obeyed his father's command at once. The PlayStation was switched off, and we both proceeded to go outside the house. I was really mad at his father. I knew he acted that way because of my status. We went into a lone alley nearby to hang out in peace.

"Do you really think we can be a thing?" I asked, seated on a wall.

"Why are you worrying about it so much? Things will find their way around," Satbeer consoled.

"Didn't you look at your parents? They already despise me for who I am. I can't even imagine what might happen if they found out about us."

Satbeer snuggled a little closer to me. He slid his arms into mine.

"If God really wishes for us to be together, then we'll be together no matter what. Okay? Then by God's mercy, nothing can come between us."

"Your father's a really influential politician, Satbeer. I doubt he'll take this lightly."

He then placed a finger on my lips.

"Shhh... enough of that. I want us to not focus on the bitter things and enjoy our time together. There will always be someone to judge us. We'll just... be vary of them."

I wanted to protest about such tolerating and suppressed behavior. But just then, I felt someone's gaze onto us. A kid at a distance was standing, staring at us. We had our arms together. And he might talk of things. I didn't entertain the thought.

"Hey, what are you looking at?" I growled.

The kid shook his head, and started to step away. But I didn't trust him.

"Wait there, you bastard!!!" I yelled as I chased him.

He attempted to flee, but his slower pace was no match to me. I caught him by the collar.

"What did you fucking see?" I snarled.

The kid was full of fear, his body trembling.

"No... nothing."

"Do you think it is okay to spy on people like that?"

I slapped him tightly across the face. He yelped in pain.

"I was just passing by," he sobbed.

"Then you could've passed by minding your own business!!" I slapped him a few more times and pushed him to the ground.

"Kartik!! He's just a kid!" Satbeer yelled from behind.

"So what? He can still run his mouth!"

I kicked the kid in his chest and grabbed him by the collar.

"Will you tell anyone about this? Huh?! Answer me!!"

"No, no, I won't!!"

I punched him across the face and kicked him yet another time in his guts.

"You better not fucking talk anything about this to anyone!!"

As I was beating him, Satbeer pulled me back.

"Hey, that's enough dude!! You'll kill him!"

I panted heavily as I glared at the kid. Still weeping and heavily bruised, he soon stood to his feet and staggered away as I cursed at him.

"Dude, what's wrong with you?" Satbeer reprimanded.

"We can never be too careful!! You still underestimate the society man! They will beat us just like that if they found out."

"You're just being too paranoid, Kartik. What does that kid even understand about homosexuality? He must've thought we were just messing around like all boys."

"I'm too paranoid? Really? Then go on, kiss me right here."

"Kartik, you're being childish."

"Why? What happened?"

But before I could cuss anymore, he put his lips to mine.

xxxxx

It was time for the Matchmaker's stupid survey. But this time, I had some additional requests. I had texted him to meet me on the side of a wide road, and he was already seated on a bench on the broad, quiet pavement. His hair still swept over his left eye, he impulsively juggled the coin around his fingers. I wondered how he did that.

"Welcome, Kartikeya. Take a seat," he greeted. "You seem like you've got to say something."

I didn't want to waste our time asking how he knew that. Of course, he was some divine being.

"My relationship. It's just so... hidden. I cannot even be myself properly around Satbeer without thinking of other people. Can't you do something?"

"Like what? Influence the society into being more lenient towards homosexuals? If I were to be able to do that, don't you think I would've already succeeded in far greater motives?"

"But this is too suffocating!! I can't live like this. The anxiety engulfs my happiness!"

"Kartikeya," he sighed, changing his tone to a more grave one.

"Nothing is free in this world. You don't simply get anything without doing something, except perhaps some luxuries in your childhood by your parents. Do you think it is just a cakewalk for me to make people fall in love? You need to suffer. You need to struggle in order to achieve your goals."

"But how? How can I possibly do it? I'm so insignificant!!"

"That is for you to find out. But if you continue to have that attitude in life, you will never succeed. Remember this, my friend. Every single thing has consequences. Be it howsoever insignificant, but it affects something, somehow, sometime. If you want to stop living like a coward, then stop being one. Nothing is acquired by merely whining and desiring."

His words made sense. If I always stayed afraid like this, I would never be able to be free. I would just continue to get buried under society's feet. I needed to change my thinking. I needed

to stop feeling inferior. What I was wasn't anyone's fault. Nor was it a crime anymore in this country. Then what right did other people fucking have to control the way I lived?

I completed the Matchmaker's peculiar interviews, and proceeded to hurry home in order to not get scolded. Nowadays, I did make efforts to study at home, which convinced my parents to some extent. Thankfully, I arrived home before my father. He wouldn't like me returning back too late, loitering around.

Moments later, his loud barking immediately notified me of his presence as I was reading. He seemed to be in a bad mood. I crept out slowly to check.

"Those fucking hijras!! He pestered me so fucking much that I had to use force," he explained to my mother.

For those unfamiliar with the word, hijra was a term for transgender or intersex people that often lived in communities. Many of them roamed the streets, clapping and dancing, asking for alms.

"Oh my!! Why did you have to do that?" my mother remarked.

"Then what? Just let that fucking transgender mess with me!! Of course not!"

"But you know how they are. They roam in groups!! They can be dangerous."

"Let them come then!! Do I fear some fucking half men? I am more dangerous."

I didn't like the way he was talking. They were people just like every man and woman. It wasn't their fault that their assigned genders were different from what they identified as. This was the problem in our society. Anyone who was odd and didn't fit in was looked down and ridiculed without any reasoning.

"You shouldn't say that," I blabbered, instantly regretting my decision.

"What did you say?"

I seemed to have no choice, "They are also humans like us. Can't you address them with some respect perhaps?"

"Are you talking back to your father, you bastard? How dare you!!"

He angrily stomped towards me and slapped me across the face.

"Instead of your own father, you are more concerned about that ugly hijra?"

"But what did they do to deserve such a fate?"

"Let me tell you what they did," he pushed me away onto the wall, "Their mistake is that they were born out of their mother's wombs!!"

He continued to grab me and hit me. Finally, mother intervened and somehow managed to break him off.

"If you had been born like that, I would've fucking chopped you up in pieces!!" he shouted as he walked away.

Looked like I had used my motivation at the wrong place. So, I gave it a bit more thought and carefully planned my actions. Saturday was college day, but I was sadly enrolled in a different one than most of my usual gang, including Satbeer. The Monday, I went to the center with a proud aura. There was nothing I needed to fear or compare myself to. I was perfect the way I was.

I approached Satbeer and pulled his arm back, twirling it over him.

"Hi darling," I joked.

The other guys shared a laugh.

"Looks like their loneliness has reached their limits. So they are searching in other genders," Irfan snickered.

"At least we'll have someone. Unlike you, who will die alone," I replied as I jumped between Varun and Satbeer.

As usual, our time proceeded with usual gossip and jokes. Except I wasn't being reluctant today, nor was I taking any insults. In fact, my nature itself seemed to have reduced the others' tendency to make remarks on me.

Naturally, I slid a bit more towards Satbeer. At one moment, I even took his palm in my hand beneath the desk. But he seemed to be hesitating, and drew it away. I noticed his discomfort as he distanced himself.

"I'm aiming for BJ Medical College. But that is really fucking tough," Umesh spoke.

"Dude, you know which one is tougher? AFMC. They keep a high security deposit so that you can't even abandon the seat if you feel," Nischay added.

"Ever heard of AIIMS? My dream is more difficult than you all," Varun expressed.

"What about Satbeer?" Nischay asked.

"I'm not sure... maybe D.Y. Patil."

"Yo, bro, isn't that a private one? Its fees go in crores," Nischay reflected.

"Are you serious, Satbeer? Then how can we be in the same college later? You know that I'm not that rich," I said.

Satbeer seemed to be surprised by my comments, and stayed silent.

"Whoa... serious future planning here going on, guys. After all, life partner before everything else," Irfan teased.

"No one was talking to you, Irfan," I snapped.

Satbeer then apparently kicked me from under the table.

"Oww. What was that for?"

"By mistake. Well, excuse me for a second, guys. Nature's call," saying, he got up.

In a while, I received a text message from him. He was telling me to meet him in the washroom discreetly. I soon got up and headed to the place. Inside, Satbeer bore a vile frown. But he was silent as a lad was still peeing besides. We waited for him to finish his business and leave.

"What are you doing, Kartik? Do you want everyone to fucking know about us?"

"I thought you weren't paranoid, Satbeer."

"Quit it, Kartik. People like us have to be careful to survive."

"But why? Why should we?"

"Because, it is how it fucking is!! Don't act like this is so serious. We aren't even mature yet. What do we know about life and love?"

"So you feel that this isn't worth fighting for? Is that how you see it?"

"You're taking it the wrong way, Kartik. Just let things be as they are and don't try to act something on your own..."

"That is what your problem is, Satbeer!! I don't want to live my life like a hidden rat!!"

Just then, Mr. Patvardhan emerged from one of the stalls. He raised an eye at us suspiciously. My heart was almost in my mouth.

"Yeah, go on, sweetheart. Nothing, just some teenagers quarreling," he then continued to talk on his ear pods.

Who the fuck wore ear pods while shitting?

16. SK

November, Monday, 7th

I had immediately requested the Matchmaker for a meeting. I had to talk about this to him. I brought my cycle to a halt as I came across a barren ground. It used to be my old school's playground, and no one came there at that hour.

Matchmaker was there, sitting on a large concrete pipe. His hair seemed more ruffled, and his palm lay flat horizontal as he swung the coin up and down through his fingers. Peculiarly enough, his clothes were pretty well dusted, as if he had done some physical labor.

"Listen, I think there has been a misunderstanding between us," I asserted.

He gave a snicker, "My understanding is at its finest. It must be you who suffered the misunderstanding."

"Whatever. When I said that I wanted Navneet to start loving me again, I meant for him to notice me more and be interested in me. But you made him a complete suck up. Now he sees nothing except me. This is really annoying!!"

"Whoa, there, wait a second. That was exactly what our agreement was. For me to induce an interest in the target towards you. And that is exactly what I did. All these further events that you claim are made solely by Navneet himself."

I was confused, "What do you mean?"

"Mind isn't a simple mechanism, SK. It is way too complex, and has the ability to modify itself. What I did was to light a mere spark on the wick. Now how the spark proceeds and how the cracker bursts is all in Navneet's powers. It is his mind alone that developed my induced interest into an obsession."

"But, can't you fix it?"

"I apologize, but I cannot. I have certain limits. Navneet's mind has consolidated its conditioning and it would be very difficult to remold it. You have to find your way around."

This had started to drive me mad. I wasn't sure how I could find my way around Navneet's desperate lunacy.

"What nonsense is this? This is not fair!! You have to make it right."

"Our deal either way doesn't mention any further problems for me to fix. The agreement only covers me initiating the interest, which I have already managed to do so."

"Oh, is this how is it going to be? Are you going to be stubborn? Fine!! I'll be stubborn too. I'm cancelling this fucking deal!" I yelled, turning around to leave.

"You can't. The agreement states that..."

"Fuck the agreement. No one controls me. I am not going to be conducting your stupid interviews anymore!! You ditch me, I ditch you!!"

I sat on my cycle and swerved it around.

"That is incompliance, and it results in a direct breach of our contract. Remember, SK, every single thing has consequences..." he didn't take any effort to increase his voice as I drove away.

xxxxxxx

I had given Navneet a clear message about what I felt towards him, and shut him off. Blocked, restricted and muted from every single platform that ever existed to contact me. Now, I was free from both, Navneet and the Matchmaker. No need for wasting an hour for those weirdass disturbing questions.

Thus, I turned to studying as usual. I had found myself to be improving in it as of lately. It was what I should've always focused on, instead of this idiotic drama. Just as I was solving the questions of genetics, my brother called me. I answered back to him, demanding a few minutes. But he didn't seem to stop.

"SK, come here quick!! SK!! SK!!"

Now, my annoy meter was full. I threw the pen on the book and left. I approached my brother in his room with the fiercest frown ever possible.

"Don't you have some fucking patience?" I yelled.

"If you see this, then you wouldn't have either," he handed me a paper.

When I took it from him, I was left aghast. The paper had on it written, 'I can't live without you' in bold. With blood. It still hadn't dried, signifying it hadn't been too long since it was crafted.

"Where... where did you get this?"

"Someone rang the doorbell, and when I went to check, only this was found slipped in. Thankfully, I snuck it before mother or father could see."

I immediately crumpled the paper in disgust, and threw it in the bin in the corner. There was only one person who was capable of doing this. He wasn't letting me go, and he was getting crazier by the moment. As I returned back to my room, I unblocked him on messages. But before I could type in anything, his text had already been received.

"Is this enough to prove my love? Or should I do more?"

"You're fucking insane! Stay the fuck away from me!!" and I blocked him once more.

The first thing I did after that was to show Navneet's picture to the watchman of my society, and tell him to not let Navneet in ever again.

xxxxxxx

"Damn, are you serious? He wrote in his own blood?" Mahi exclaimed.

"I don't know. Could've also been someone else's?" I added.

"Whose? A... are you saying that... Navneet killed someone?"

"What? No, I... I don't know. Maybe some kind of animal or something."

"And that Matchmaker simply refuses to do anything?"

I shrugged, "Just like that. That's why, I did the same. I refused to do those fucking interviews with him."

I expected Mahi to laugh and pat my back, praising me for my bold style. But she was rather quiet, and worried.

"You... you just said it to his face?" Mahi murmured.

"Yeah, so what? Do I fear that weirdo? I'll just go to the police if he tries anything funny."

"I'm not sure about that. But he definitely seems someone not to be messed with."

"Whatever. But are you coming to shopping today?? Please!!"

"Oh, yeah, I had discussed it yesterday with my mother, and... Do you know what she said? She said okay!!"

I gave a happy squeal, and took both of Mahi's hands to perform a quick merry dance.

After the class, we exited the building chatting. Once again, everyone left by their own ways, and it was only me with my cycle. I unlocked it, and climbed on its seat only to sense that something was wrong. The tires didn't feel inflated. I knelt to check, and true enough, both of them were empty.

It was too heck of a coincidence for both the tires to have been punctured at once. Someone had done this. I headed to the guards to report this.

"Is that so? Wait, I'll check the cameras and entries to find out the culprit. Why don't you go and repair your bike till then? There's a garage nearby," one of them responded.

I felt it to be the right decision, and started walking my green Hercules bike towards the direction the guard pointed to. But just a mere few meters, and someone jumped in front of me. It was none other than Navneet, and he looked completely distraught.

"Wait, SK! Please talk to me!!" he begged, his red eyes glaring at me.

"What the... is it you? Are you the one who punctured my cycle?"

"Look, I know that wasn't right, but please just listen to me. I did it to get back with you."

"No, I'm not going to listen to anything anymore. And how the hell did you even manage to skip past the guards?"

He scorned, "That wasn't much hard. Crowd and correct excuses and I didn't even manage to be doubted."

"Navneet, I don't know what fucking sick shit is going on in your head, but please let me go my way."

"No, no, no!!! I can't do that!! Or else, you'll run away from me yet again!! Didn't you see my love in that blood? I can do anything for you, SK!! Anything!! I can give my life for you!!"

This was now getting scarier. A few bystanders were also staring at us in doubt. One of the uncles approached me.

"Hey, kid, is everything okay?" he asked me.

"Uhh... this guy here won't let me leave."

The uncle then growled at Navneet, "Hey, what is the matter? Leave the lady alone!!"

Navneet stared at both of us, before scampering away like a rat. I thanked the uncle and resumed to the garage. Soon enough, when it was all fixed, I returned to the center to discuss the issue and the guards concluded not to let in Navneet ever again.

That evening, as per our plan, I and the girls were going shopping. I met Kshitija and Vrushali waiting by the mall's gate, but there was no sign of Mahi. She was late as expected. We entered the Pavilion mall after her arrival. It was huge and fancy. There was luster everywhere, and costly dresses hung every single inch.

We weren't obviously going to purchase any of those. We were here only because of a supposed sale in Zara, which reduced the prices to as low as 50%. But their attraction was so strong that we couldn't resist checking and trying them out at the very least.

"Hey, SK check this dress. You'll totally slay in this girl!!" Kshitija was standing in front of me.

Her hands had a red velvety one piece. I instantly knew after looking at it that my mother would kill me for even thinking about such a fashion. Nevertheless, I held the dress above, and examined its beauty, imagining it on my own body. Just then, something caused me to drop the dress from my grip and earn a scolding from Kshitija.

"What's wrong with you? Where are you looking?" she traced my sight to find a blank mannequin.

"No... nothing. I just thought that the mannequin was someone else," I dismissed the topic and instead took another dress to keep the conversation going on.

But I could swear that I had seen Navneet standing in the mannequin's place for a split second. I soon forgot about the incident, and we moved onto the gift shop.

It consisted of several beautiful and elegant home decors and ornaments. Mahi fell in love with an earthen flower pot sculpted like a ship. It was really a unique shop that had unique objects all around.

"Oh my gosh!! See this bunny door knocker!!" Vrushali picked up a brown chiseled object.

"Too bad we have a safety door!! I can't use this!!" she cried.

"Don't worry... Attach it to your personal room door," I suggested.

"Personal room? You might have that, but there's no personal room in our house."

"I feel you sister," Mahi gave a heart thump. "My sister always..."

Just then, something caught my eye in a mirror across. In the midst of its metallic vines, there was a momentary flash of Navneet's figure. My breathing picked up pace, and I ran towards the mirror to inspect. I searched in the aisle around, but couldn't spot that stalker.

"Can I help you, miss?" an attendant noticed my frantic efforts.

"Have you seen a weird looking guy? He was just here!"

"A guy? I'm sorry, but, I haven't seen anyone else except you people for sometime."

I dismissed the incident as an illusion of my mind. The others seemed surprised at my such actions, but I pretended to be rather excited because of the mirror's charm.

At the end of our trip, we hadn't bought even a single dress, and instead ended up purchasing some cute mufflers. The remaining money we aimed to spend on edibles. We stopped by a Burger King and gave our orders.

I needed a huge whopper to fill my belly, but the others seemed content with the smaller burgers. Each one of us took a meal, which ended up giving us a massive bunch of fries.

"Can someone drink my Cola? I don't want it," Vrushali whined.

"What? You don't like Coke?" Mahi exclaimed.

"No, but I've got a cold, so my mom has advised me otherwise."

"Ah, but I've already drunk a whole," Kshitija exhaled.

"Okay, then, what if all 3 of you split it?"

"But I've not yet finished mine!" Mahi cried.

Just then, the speaker in the cafe boomed. It was pretty busy in there, so the voice was barely audible. But I still managed to catch a certain word.

"Mr. Navneet..."

Perhaps it wasn't an illusion. Maybe Navneet had really come tracking me. The thought scared the wits out of me, and I got up to head to the counter to find out.

As I neared, a masculine figure was slowly being visible past the crowd. When I was finally close enough, the person came directly across me with their tray in their hands.

"Hey, watch it," the guy called, before walking away.

He wasn't Navneet. At least not the one I thought him to be. I was really being paranoid. There certainly wasn't only one person named Navneet in this whole world. Heck, a famous stationery brand was another namesake.

When I returned to my table, my friends seemed worried.

"Ah, nothing... It's just that the burger was too spicy so I went to grab water. Those fucking jalapenos," I lied.

"But jalapenos aren't that spicy, are they?" Kshitija interjected.

But before I could say anything, Mahi took over, "Everyone has their own spice tolerance. I can't even handle the spicy Chinese sauces."

I laughed in accordance, and continued to munch my whopper.

Our trip had then come to an end, and it was time for us to leave. It had been late evening, so each one of us was hurrying to reach back home. Kshitija and Mahi took a rickshaw in share as they lived in the same direction. Vrushali had her father waiting in their car as always.

Meanwhile, I had to walk some distance to the nearest bus stop. That's why I disliked them. They were always farther from your destinations.

I couldn't remember when exactly, but I began sensing a particular type of footsteps following me. I didn't do anything without confirmation. I waited for a while to check whether they were really the same. And they were.

They were the same footsteps, at the same pace, following me for quite a while now. I finally decided to turn around and confront them. But it was just an elderly granny, who looked at me innocently, and turned to the pedestrian crossing.

Just as I twirled to face my direction, I was caught off guard by Navneet only a foot away from me.

"Damn, fuck!! So you were following me all this time!"

"Yes. But I don't mean to trouble you..."

I didn't bother listening to him, and simply took a different route. But he wasn't ready to leave me today. He began following me still. I increased my speed and began jogging. But he could jog too.

I soon slipped in an alleyway, and kept changing my direction to lose him. Soon enough, I couldn't see him behind me, but the sound of his fast footsteps was echoing around in the silence.

"Don't run away from me, my love!! I will find you!!" he yelled.

I managed to get out of the network of alleyways, and finally entered a regular street. I was glad to not see Navneet around, and hurried away. I still had to locate a bus stop. The escape had directed me away from my planned one.

I soon spotted one on the other side of the road, and decided to cross. The traffic signal seemed to have been red for long, so I needed to cross quickly before it turned green.

When I neared the footpath, a face made itself distinct from the crowd. Navneet dashed out of nowhere, and attempted to grab my hands.

"Stop running away from me!! We belong to each other!!" he crazily cried.

I began reflexively backing up, but I missed that the traffic signal had already changed. A public bus was speeding from the side, and it dashed right onto me, crushing me under it.

17. Mahi

Thursday, 9th, November

I slowly trudged inside the room, inspecting my surroundings. It looked like somebody's home, decorated in the most peaceful manner. There were vases and lamps placed on desks, and a few comfy couches. My mother left me alone with the lady at the center of the room. She smiled at me, and offered me to take a seat.

"I'm... Mahi," I uttered.

"Yes, I know. I'm Dr. Chaurasiya. Don't stay tense... relax yourselves. We have an hour all to ourselves. Take a few deep breaths... in, and out."

I did as she told, and it calmed me down minutely.

"Okay, let's begin," she announced. "What distress are you suffering from lately?"

"I... my friend, she... she recently died. But it's not once. Another one of my friends had, too, passed away in the previous month. I feel like all those around me will be doomed to die."

"Oh, that sure is traumatizing. Losing 2 of your friends in such a short span of time. But what if I tell you, I've been through something worse."

It made me wonder.

"Worse?"

"Yeah. My father had been suffering from gastric cancer for a long time, and by the time we found out, it was already too late. He passed away exactly in front of me, vomiting blood, right on to me. I must have been only 11-12 years old at that time."

"Oh, no. Then... how did you get over it?"

"I never did. I simply live with it, like a paying guest in my mind. There is never a way out. Only one way, which is, facing your challenges. "

xxxxxxx

It had been only a few days since the mishap. As I came to the class, I could feel everybody's eyes on me. Or maybe not. Maybe I was imagining all that. My mind was playing tricks on me. The center was feeling dimmer than usual, its usual joyous aura turned into something sinister.

I took my seat, but didn't talk to anyone. Who was there to talk to? Both of my best friends were dead. I could see others looking at me with curiosity, and then gossiping amongst themselves. It was so annoying. Some of them tried to interact with me, but I simply pushed them away.

Then, after some moments, while I was still zoned out into my better nostalgia, Varun arrived and quietly took a seat beside me. I didn't learn of his presence until I had begun to gaze around by myself.

"Hey. How are you doing," he spoke, searching for something in his bag.

"I'm doing... okay."

"Does the therapy help?"

"I guess it does, because I'm slowly getting over it. But still, every time I exit the clinic, both of their apparitions flash before me, as if urging me not to forget them."

Varun just hummed in response, and sat thinking something, staring towards the wall.

"But don't you think it is a bit odd? The way they died?" I mentioned.

"Yes, it definitely is. There must've been only a couple of days between their accidents. Coincidences like that are too rare to happen, next to impossible," he spoke in a grim manner.

"That's it, Varun. I don't think that they were accidents."

Varun looked at me with a surprise.

"Okay, let's just talk something else..." he tried to rebuffer.

"No, no, no!! I'm serious!" I then looked around to ensure no one was eavesdropping. "I have a strong feeling that whatever happened to them were more than just accidents."

"Yes, of course, they were more than mere accidents. Lalit and Navneet had major roles to play. But they have already been properly sued. What else can we do now?"

"No, not Lalit or Navneet. I believe that there is someone else behind the..."

"Mahi, you don't seem to pay attention in your therapies. I think I need to call your mother..."

"Oh my God, Varun, I didn't expect this from you!! Can't you just trust me? You know I'm not crazy!!"

Varun didn't look in the mood of an argument. So, he just gave in.

"Okay, fine. Tell me what you feel," he rested his head on his left palm.

"There is this... person. He is very mysterious, and shady. He's called the Matchmaker."

As soon as those words left my mouth, Varun's face turned pale.

"Do you know him?" I asked.

"What? Who? The Matchmaker? Nah-unh," he shook his head.

"He sort of, you know, promised Aruna and SK... to help them acquire the attention of the people that they desired. At first, all of us thought it to be stupid, but he then proved it to us by accomplishing certain impossible tasks. But he had some strange conditions. That he wanted them to spend an hour once a week answering him some surveys.

And I remember this one day... Aruna hadn't yet done her survey, and her deadline was almost over. I think... yes, I'm sure. The day she died was the day it ended. And, and SK!! She was tired of him, because her boyfriend had begun to become obsessive. And the day she died, she told me to have had quarreled with the Matchmaker the day before."

Varun listened to me with mixed expressions. He didn't seem sure of what to feel.

"Did... are you going to him, too?" he finally uttered.

"What?! No, no, I've only heard of him from those 2."

I had no intention of revealing my encounters to him. As it was for his own sake that I did. It would break his trust in me if he were to know I used a guy to seduce him against his will.

"I... actually... I've heard of him. The Matchmaker," Varun finally whispered. "From... Kartikeya, my friend. You know him, right? It suddenly reminded me when you described him. He had told me similar things."

I nodded, but I couldn't possibly guess for whom Kartikeya might've contacted the Matchmaker for.

"He mentioned these conditions under strict guidelines, and had even started taking harsh actions if they were broken," I completed, sighing.

"So you think that maybe he manipulated Lalit and Navneet into..."

"Could be. I swear that person is truly capable of toying with people. If he can make people fall in love, maybe he can also make people... kill each other?"

Varun once again turned his gaze towards the wall, thinking deeply.

"But then what about it? Let's just consider for a moment that this was how it happened. But how are we going to convince the police? They have already closed their files with the boyfriends, and nothing seems to be out of place. They are definitely not going to entertain our proposal."

"That's true," I concurred after contemplating.

"And, besides, it is a really big accusation to point at a person like that. We shouldn't say anything before we are completely sure."

"I'm going to meet him today," I blabbered, before remembering about my secrecy, "To confront... about this matter."

"Confront? Do you think he would like it if you go to him asking things like that? No, no, don't do it."

"Relax, I'll go under the pretext of needing help to match with someone."

"But still, it seems risky. I'll go instead," Varun offered, threatening to ruin my plan.

"No, you can't. Because... You didn't know Aruna and SK as good as me. Thus, you won't be able to ask the right questions. Please, Varun, let me go."

Varun seemed to hesitate for a second, and tried to refuse. But in the end, he realized that he couldn't win against me. As a result, I proceeded to book an appointment with the Matchmaker after the class ended. When I was done, Varun suddenly grasped my hand.

"Just be sure to not make any deals with him," he said.

So bad I wanted to scream that I already had.

xxxxxx

He was present in a solitary classroom in a corner, where nobody was present. He nodded at me as soon as I stepped in. This time, he was clad in a better fashion, with a white T-shirt and dark brown jeans. Yet, his hair and the habit of fiddling with the coin seemed unchanged.

As I took my seat besides, he handed me a paper, which was a first. The paper had some eerie ink blotted diagrams.

"What do you see?" he asked, still scribbling in his notepad.

"I... I see a storm? Maybe? Or is that a fig? A knife and a fig maybe."

The Matchmaker hummed, and simply resumed to write in his notes.

"I... did you know what happened to SK?" I attempted to casually mention.

"What about it?" he kept his tone solemn.

"Nothing, just... it's just so strange that she died in such a manner."

"Mahi, I think I made it very clear to you the other day that the 60 minutes reserved in our deal are not for pointless chatter."

"Yes, yes, I know, I'm sorry."

He then took the paper from my hands, and placed another one in its place.

"What do you see now?" he questioned.

"I... it's a sleeping dog? Maybe? Or a person?"

He snatched the paper without any comments, and continued to scribble in his notepad.

"Umm... you seemed to have met SK the other day, right? Do you have any idea of what might have been going on with her?"

He flung his apparatus onto the desk, and turned towards me with the same expressionless face.

"Yes. She came to me to complain about her dissatisfaction, to which I had to admit not being of any more assistance. But her limited intelligence disallowed her to understand that, which made her disobey our deal and face its consequences."

I shivered at the mention of the word 'consequences'.

"What do you mean by..."

"Mahi, if you ask me what those consequences were, I won't describe them to you, but instead make you experience them. My temper is not something to be entertained for too long."

"Yes, yes, I apologize. Let's get going with our interviews," I improvised.

I was now completely convinced that he had some hand in my friends' deaths. But I couldn't figure out how he had managed to manipulate those guys in such a way, or how I could prove it to the police. He was a genuinely dangerous person, and the realization made me tremble all the time I was with him.

Once it was time for my leave, I managed to gather some courage and take out my mobile. I pretended to text someone, but in reality, I was adjusting the camera to take the Matchmaker's picture. There was no sound when I clicked it, but still, he turned his eyes towards me as if he heard it at some different frequency. I continued to keep up my act, and rushed out of the classroom.

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"This is him, the Matchmaker," I held the mobile for Varun to see.

He didn't seem surprised, but still inspected the image for a second.

"Have you ever seen him?" I asked him, to which he shook his head as he handed me my phone.

"But someone must have. If he's in this center, it means he studies here. There must be somebody who has some information about him. I will ask everyone that I know of."

"I'll do the same. Let's split," I suggested, to which he agreed.

I started from our class, and asked the entire strength, but in vain. No one seemed to know him. I went outside the class, and tried with some of the familiar people.

"Nah... I don't interact with ugly guys," Nehal commented.

"He's so weird... I would've easily recognized such a face if I knew it," said Tushar.

"Nope... not in our section. I know everybody in there," replied Kritika.

I found this to be very strange. How could no one have seen this guy? I had roamed across almost the whole center, but there seemed to be no trace of him. Then it suddenly occurred to me that I had never actually seen him attend any of the classes. So was he really admitted in here?

I decided to aim for someone else. Not a student. I approached the incoming Mr. Patvardhan, and showed him the photo. He looked at it with a squint, then scratched his head.

"Does he have a name?" he asked.

"Sir, Mandar. Mandar Mandlekar."

"Mandar Mandlekar... hmm... I don't remember the face, but I swear I have heard the name somewhere."

The answer excited me up, "Where? Where have you heard it?"

"That's the problem, I don't remember. But it was certainly in this center. By the way, what work do you have with him?"

"I... had my book accidentally exchanged with him when I had sat next to him while self-studying the other day."

"Oh... well, then I suggest you try Nimish bhaiya. He might be of some assistance."

His suggestion wasn't at all bad. Nimish bhaiya was a peon at our center, and he could provide me with the registers of each batch through which I could easily locate the Matchmaker. So I followed the idea and came in contact with him. He quickly agreed to aid me, and directed me to the records room.

"These are all the attendance registers of all the batches. See if you can find your guy," he asserted and went to his work.

I thoroughly ran through each of the registers, but no name even close to his popped up. I must have checked it twice, but certainly, his name wasn't on any of the lists. I could have gone back to Nimish bhaiya, and demanded more of his assistance, which might have eventually led me to find MM. There were even cameras all around in here.

But I didn't wish to make a fuss out of this. If the Matchmaker got to know about our deeds, I could only imagine what he might do to us. It was better to stay discreet. Thus, I sulked back to our class, and there I reunited with Varun. We exchanged our stories.

"That's impossible! It means that either he doesn't even study in here, or he has lied to us about his true identity," Varun exclaimed, "I did talk with the guards too, but they claim to have never seen him. I bought them a chips packet each and requested to notify me if they ever came across that guy," Varun explained.

"What should we do next?" I queried, finding myself at a block.

"I'm not sure either. Let's take some time and think it out."

So as per the plan, I started beating my brains out until the class began. The zoology lecture didn't seem to have any zeal in it, even though the teacher was teaching about human diseases, which was my favorite topic. The recess was also in vain, and the following botany lecture bored

me to death. After the class ended, Varun excused himself somewhere, leaving me in my own company. As I was about to leave for the bus stop, I received a call from my mother.

"Where's your sister?"

"How am I supposed to know that?"

"It is saying her phone is switched off. Can you please find out where she is?"

"But she can come by herself!"

"Please, Mahi! I'm requesting you."

If it had been some other time, she would have scolded me black and blue for not obeying her. But my recent trauma history had her behavior altered. Nevertheless, I agreed to her, and began asking around for my sister. From her friends, I got to know that she had gone to a nearby bakery to eat patties.

Hurrying while keeping my bus schedule in mind, I rushed searching for the place. When I found the location at last, I learnt that Kavya wasn't alone. She was with a.... boy. And not just any boy. I knew my sister enough to tell that apart.

"What are you doing here?" I surprised her from behind.

She was clearly startled at discovering me.

"Huh?! Ah, nothing, nothing."

"With a guy," I emphasized.

"No, no, no!! It's not how you think it is!! He's just a friend!!!"

"Oh, is that, so? Then why did you ditch your usual friends for him?"

"It's just... oh my God!! Are you going to tell on me now? Is that how it is going to be?"

"Well, you did after all do the same thing to me once," I scorned.

"Please, don't!! I beg you!! I'll do anything that you say. I'll listen to you all the time!!!"

"I'm not going to rat you out."

Kavya seemed to be aghast and perplexed at my response at the same time.

"But... why? You have every reason and opportunity to do so?" she stated.

"Because I'm not you. Now take my phone and fucking call mom. She's pestering me."

Kavya stared at me in disbelief, and took the phone I handed. Yeah, even I surprised myself at times.

That afternoon, I found myself drawing on my notebook. Nothing related to academics. I was trying to connect the dots with my friends' deaths, their boyfriends and the Matchmaker. But it wasn't definitely as easy as they showed in the movies. I had started to momentarily doze off, when my mobile's message notification jerked me awake. I checked the sender. It was Varun.

"I have got a lead."

18. Amyra

November, Tuesday, 8th

I was feeling very flustered. Very, very flustered. Because I had just now been back from a very important and prestigious mission. No, nothing with Vedraj. It was an olympiad. Namely, the International Astronomy Olympiad. Yes, even though I was studying in the medical stream, I was allowed to have varying interests.

One of which included astronomy, and a few others were maths, art and Sanskrit. In this manner, I had studied, burning the candle at both ends. And the result was that I came first. Not at the center level, or district or state. A whooping national level, that is, in the whole of India. Unfortunately, I was cut short by 48 other people for achieving the same at the international level.

Even though that did upset my parents a little bit, I was a lot satisfied. I had never accomplished such a great achievement ever before. All the olympiads I had attempted always concluded with me being in the top 5 at the national level and 1st only at the state one.

Yet, there were not many people that were familiar with my deed. Because, as you might have realized by now, I hated attention. My father always advised me to never boast of one's even mightiest actions. The only person other than my parents, whom I had shared this incident with, was Vedraj. He did seem overjoyed over the chat, but I was nervous over his personal response.

My father soon brought his Pulsar to a halt, signifying the completion of our journey. I stepped down and bid him goodbye, before rushing inside the center. Though it was an ordinary day, I weirdly felt that there were rather fewer people than usual around. Ignoring the feeling, I proceeded towards my classroom.

The door was strangely closed. And surprisingly, I couldn't see any light coming from the inside. It led me to rethink my timetable, doubting whether there was a class scheduled today. I decided to examine it properly, and stepped in.

As soon as I had done that, the light abruptly switched on, and a loud cheering erupted.

"Surprise!!" yelled the whole class.

I found myself completely alarmed and confounded. My classmates were arranged into some kind of a pattern, but their eyes all on me. The middle ones bore some kind of sheets, each of which had letters written on them. When read together, it pronounced my name. A few balloons and ribbons filled the otherwise barren texture of the room.

Before I could take another breath, I was showered with what I first presumed to be rose petals. But upon a closer look, they were revealed to be simply dark red confetti. The students in the chorus sang a cheesy 'congratulations'. As if this wasn't enough, Vedraj soon himself emerged from behind the sheet holders.

He walked up to me in elegance, and grasped my palm as he lightly tugged me further.

He then began announcing, "My girlfriend, is the first in the whole of India in the Astronomy Olympiad. She is indeed the smartest person I've ever met. A big hand for my girl!!"

He pulled me closer to himself in an embrace as everyone hollered and clapped. This was all seriously too embarrassing. Literally all the students, that I'd never even talked to, were staring and yelling at me. There even seemed to be some of Vedraj's associates from the other batches. I had become the center of attention, and I could already imagine the whole center soon gossiping about me.

And to my further horror, our chemistry sir walked in. He seemed puzzled at the beginning, but after taking a look at the board, he got a drift of everything. On the board lied an artwork that I had fully missed, which was an expression of my achievement.

"Oh, wow, seems like we have a very bright prodigy amongst us. I always expected that SK could do something like this. Hearty congrats my dear!!"

And it just turned worse. The teacher informed this to the other staff, and they arranged an impromptu celebration for me. I was praised in front of every batch, each of the faculty delivering some speeches. I was too flabbergasted by the events, and could barely speak. Yet, it wasn't over.

After the trips, a normal lecture resumed. Then, during the recess, it was a havoc. Everybody was trying to strike some conversation with me. It was fine up to a moment, but it soon turned out to be exhausting after the questions started repeating.

"How do you study so much? What is your secret?" "How did you manage between the olympiad and the usual tests?" "How do you get so many marks? Give me some tips for studying. I find this topic so difficult!!"

Eventually, when I started to focus in my mobile, the attention shed off. It was nice and quiet as I liked it for sometime. I was scrolling YouTube shorts, until Vedraj decided to drop in.

"What are you doing here all alone? It's a big day for you!! You should enjoy it with everyone!! Let's celebrate!! See what I got you," he then put forth a cheese dabeli.

After that, he took another one for himself, and insisted me to take a bite. He was too sweet, but the attention was making me a little uncomfortable. Being with the loudest guy meant that I would get just the equal amount of attention. And truly enough, his friends started attracting after he offered each one a dabeli.

"Namaste bhabhi. Thank you for the dabeli," Nischay greeted, "You 2 are perfect for each other; topper bhabhi and rowdy champ."

The way he addressed me, as bhabhi, which meant sister-in-law, felt way too peculiar.

"You are so fortunate to have a partner like Vedraj bhai," Irfan added, "His popularity will easily enhance your valor. After all, he's the don of Prabodhan."

"I guess bhabhi studies more than anyone of us ever have in our lives," Umesh tried to joke.

Vedraj burst in a guffaw and slapped his back, continuing with their mocks. Though I was too fond of Vedraj, his friends were more or less tolerable. All of them seemed to be unsophisticated hooligans. Plus, once their group started to have their boys talk, I felt totally alienated. I could understand that in the attempt of trying to create a celebration, Vedraj got sucked into his friendships.

Some moments later, it occurred to me to excuse myself with some pretext. I lied about going to the washroom, and tried to escape into peace. But the destination wasn't exactly the quietest of the places. So instead, I just hung around the canteen corner, keeping myself busy with YouTube.

"You seem really agitated," someone startled me.

"What? No... no. I'm fine."

"I know you're not into socializing. It must've have been exhausting for you to have a populous boyfriend," Kartikeya continued.

"No, it's nothing like that. I just... wanted some air."

"Exactly what I said."

"Ah... okay, fine, I give in. But don't go on rambling it to him. I don't want him to isolate himself from his friends because of me. Nor I want him to think of me as an antisocial freak."

Kartikeya gave a chuckle, "You're not an antisocial freak. It's perfectly normal... everyone has their own 'social tolerance'. Some have it more, and some have it less. And lucky for you, you picked someone on the opposite end."

"Do you think what I did was right? Do you really think that someone like me deserves Vedraj?" popped out of my mouth.

"Whoa, whoa, easy there!! Why the need for an identity crisis? You're good enough just the way you are."

"I'm good for myself. But what about Vedraj? I always feel that I'm like an unnecessary burden to him, tarnishing his social life because of mine."

"That's nonsense... I haven't seen any difference in his status around here. Instead, it seems to be elevated after today's events. You need to stop thinking that."

"I am just a nerdy topper, Kartik. I know of his past girlfriends, and I'm nowhere near them. What friends even do I have, other than you?"

"The count of friends doesn't dictate anything. Even I'm often ridiculed by whom I consider to be my friends. But, what I mean to say is, it's the strength of the relation that really matters. And none of that either way decides a person's worth. Everyone is unique in their own way. Do you think I cry for being a loser in studies? My parents must beat me once a week at my failures."

"It's different for you boys, Kartik. You are too lucky. You won't understand the problems in a girl's life," I spat what I felt.

Kartik chuckled, "Funny, I was going to say the exact..."

But before our conversation could go on, it was suddenly interrupted by a certain someone.

"Hey, Amyra, what are you doing here, away?" Vedraj strolled in, glaring at Kartikeya.

"And what's up with you two?" he squinted his eyes in suspicion.

"Oh, nothing. I just ran into her on my way. I'll go now... have some tasks..." Kartikeya walked away.

Vedraj seemed to be pissed, which was acceptable. He had planned the celebration for me, and here I was, chatting with another guy.

"What is with him that you had to leave to talk with him?" Vedraj openly questioned.

"Nothing, I just ran into him while waiting here!!"

"Waiting here? Why were you waiting here all alone?"

"It's just... I needed some air."

"There is plenty of air in our classroom."

"Yeah but... there were just too many people."

He seemed to ignore my issue, "You better stay away from Kartikeya. He seems too... interested in you."

"What? Of course not!! He's just a friend!!"

Hadn't he learnt about Kartik and Kshitija?

"Then why do you have so much problem in that? Can't you just take a break from a friend? Can't you even do that for me?"

Maybe I would have if I had plenty of other people to talk to.

"Remember, you're my girl now. It won't look nice if you're seen interacting too much with other boys. Besides, you don't know them. Boys always think with their dicks."

I could understand Vedraj's jealousy. He had all the right in the world to be mad at me. Our different social positions totally clashed with each other. I gave him an apology, which he seemed to be content with, and we strolled in solitude while chatting. Sometimes, one just needed to think about their partner and adjust according to them. That was what a relationship was... a mutual compromise. But was it mutual in our case?

xxxxxxx

The attention had effectively faded the next day, and I was thankfully left alone as usual. I had been reading organic chemistry, when a hand suddenly swept away my book.

"You know, you can die if you study too much," Vedraj uttered.

"But the test is next week," I protested.

He gave a chortle, "Lot of time. But I'm serious. Increased mental stress can lead to hypertension, which can cause internal hemorrhage, atherosclerosis and even brain strokes."

"Wow... you're reading notes?"

"Of course not. It was on an Instagram meme, scientifically reasoning against study and exams."

"Okay, enough kidding. Hand me the book now."

"Nope. You need to chill a little bit."

"But the test..."

"Oh come on, the tests are gonna be the whole year and the rest of your life. Can't you spend some time with me? Are you really choosing a test over me?"

"No, it's not like that."

He seemed to have misinterpreted it for my approval, and flung the book to the farther corner of the desk. And once he started talking, I found it difficult to oppose, and simply went with the flow. Maybe he was right. Maybe I should've taken a little break. After all, I had just worked hard for an olympiad too.

"By the way, you heard the song I sent to you?"

"Song? Oh, the one with the rap?"

"Yeah, MC Stan. Did you like it?"

"Yeah, it was nice."

Well, my playlists mostly included pop songs and ballads. But who said one couldn't try other genres? I did like the song... I guess. And frankly, it was quite vulgar. If my parents had heard it by chance, they would've disowned me.

Vedraj spoke, "I know, right? MC Stan is the best. Indian rappers are really making their mark in the world. What are you listening nowadays? Is it still those Korean lads... that BTS?"

"It's EXO!"

"Whatever, all those are the same. Feminine and homosexuals. I don't get what you girls find better in them than Indian guys. They are more tough and handsome than those femboys."

"It's not like that!! Some of them are listed in the world's most handsome people's lists."

I didn't get what was with Indian boys and their unnecessary hate towards K-pop.

"Hah! The lists must be rigged then. You girls don't have an idea about the reality of those gays. I'll send you this video, which you watch after going home. The Koreans are actually the most racist people in the world. They discriminate everyone on the basis of everything. Economic status, nationality, ethnicity, appearance, merit, everything!!

Especially Indians. They think that we are all bumpkins and savages. All they do is set high standards of beauty and make people put all that plastic on their bodies. That's what they do. All they are, are people of fake beauty. Just look at Indian superstars. Hritik Roshan, Shah Rukh Khan!! Do you even listen to Indian music?"

"Of course!! Every new Bollywood song!!"

"Ah, that Bollywood is just corrupted shit. You should listen to indie and solo artists. Wait, I'll share these playlists with you. You have a knack for assignments, right? Then here, I'm giving you an assignment. Listen to at least one of these playlists whole by the weekend. These are all masterpieces of the true Indian artists. Emiway, Divine, King!! I'll change my name if you don't enjoy them!! You'll forget all about the foreigners and Bollywood."

"Okay, I'll try."

"Try?"

"I mean, yes of course, I will!"

Now I had 2 assignments to manage. These playlists, and the syllabus of the upcoming test.

"Hey, by the way, did you hear about that girl who died? Something by SK?"

At that mention, my eyes almost went double their size.

"What the hell are you saying? When... How... What?!"

xxxxxxx

I had convinced my parents about my after study plan, the time which I instead utilized for spending the 60 minutes. There was the MM, in complete dark clothes. His hairstyle was just what was needed to make him look like a serial killer. He nodded to me while juggling his coin.

"Okay, let's start. What thing do you fear the most?" he began.

"Fear? Umm... maybe, it's getting separated from Vedraj."

"And what do you loathe the most?"

"Loathe... I guess it is... being too weak and timid?"

"I meant, what 'thing' do you loathe the most?"

"Thing? Well... probably it's dogs?"

It was now when the Matchmaker suddenly cocked his head towards me. He examined me from top to bottom, making me feel a little violated. But nevertheless, he went back to scribbling.

"Which person do you detest the most?"

"Person? And detest? Umm... I don't exclusively hate anyone, but I'll say... Nisha."

"Nisha was Vedraj's ex-girlfriend. You answered Mr. Patvardhan the last time," he stated and dropped his pen on the desk.

"You are not yourself today, Amyra. All the answers you've provided me with don't arise from your own mind. You have been heavily biased by someone, something. And I cannot study such an unstable psyche. Why don't you go outside and liberate your thoughts. I'll consider mere 10 minutes taken, and then you'll just have to pay your remaining 50."

"Wait... what do you mean by all this?"

"It means that your submissiveness has led you to confuse your own identity. You've forgotten your own passions and hobbies. Because you always submit to external factors, you have allowed them to easily mold your mind. You have little originality left and your thoughts are easily altering, which isn't seemingly helping me in my examination. Go to a peaceful setting, and meditate for a while. Think about who and what forces you to alter your beliefs.

Trust a little in yourself, and don't be too gullible to think everything happening is for your benefit. There is no thing such as true morality in this world. Identify the things and thoughts that come from within you. What you, as yourself, want to be. And don't be afraid of going against those who wish to press you."

"Is... is that so? Am I such a pushover?"

The Matchmaker gave a smirk, "Everybody is a pushover to some extent. What matters is how much of a 'pushbacker' you are."

19. Varun

Wednesday, 15th, November

The botany lecture was extremely excruciating. I couldn't have been more grateful in my life when it ended. I did realize that it was important for my AIIMS admission, but the situation currently wasn't exactly suitable.

The Matchmaker was indeed an eerie person, thus I didn't doubt Mahi's words much. He well enough appeared as a psychopath, and his strange miraculous abilities could be just as dangerous as beneficial they were.

And I simply couldn't digest the fact that no one, including the guards, hadn't ever seen that guy. How could someone who possibly didn't even study here go unnoticed? He seriously scared me a little. He was definitely not an ordinary person despite how he pretended to be one. But there was one other person than me and Mahi who knew about the Matchmaker. I wanted to have a talk with him too, as well as warn him about this dude's nature.

I excused myself from Mahi, and began searching around for the usual boys group. There it was, in a corner of the compound, their laughing and excitement trickling my sobriety. But I didn't approach it as always. Instead, I called my guy out to have some privacy. He first tried inviting me, but upon learning that I wasn't interested, he excused himself.

"What's up brother? Where have you been since yesterday," Kartikeya clapped my hand in a greeting.

"Just a bit busy. You seem to be mixing up good lately."

"Yeah. But what's the matter that you've called me aside for?"

I explained to him every detail of all the events that took place with me since the past few days. He seemed to be intently listening, reacting solemnly to each instance. At the last, he seemed to be rather anxious and ruminating.

"If you say it like that, I'm a little suspicious too. That guy is not exactly the best of the people to go along with. All those weird gory and disturbing questions he asks only support that theory. What do you propose we should do?"

"I am not exactly sure. The Matchmaker is definitely smart and dangerous, and we shouldn't underestimate him. We practically have zero information about him right now. The thing I advise is to stay on his good terms for the time being. Just be on time, and do as he says. I can't predict what he might do if we act like Aruna and SK."

"Yeah, okay."

"Hey, by the way, who was that you said you heard about the MM from?"

"Ah, that's just Vedraj's fling, Amyra. The topper of the center."

"Oh yeah, right. Will you please warn her about this too?"

"Well, Vedraj is acting somewhat possessive over her nowadays. But don't worry, I'll find a way and convey it to her."

"How did she get to know about him anyways?"

"Just like me, met him once randomly outside, and seemingly manipulated her father to not have any objection with them hanging out as a proof. She did mention that she wasn't much enlightened about him, and I do believe her because she hardly socializes around. But whatever, I'll see what I can get. Be it from her or someone else."

"Appreciate that. I'll go home and think what else can be done. Bye," I bid farewell to him and left for my bus.

All the while, I searched for a solution, but failed to get one. I tried thinking about every possibility to get help from either my parents or the police, but the accusation just sounded stupidly absurd and baseless. The thought occurred to me of the victims' texts being helpful. But the most that they would have messaged would be about their meeting, and that didn't seem weighing much against the actually convicted perpetrators.

And it was either way a really difficult decision to make. I couldn't just go to the police and express whatever I felt. I'd even heard that they could punish you if they felt you were being foolish and wasting their time. The second thought was about notifying the center of this uninvited visitor.

But it meant that they would take some serious steps against him, which might just set him off. I wasn't sure of the Matchmaker's capabilities, so I didn't wish to directly clash with him in any way before shedding some light on his true identity. So, I just focused on ways to find more about him, unsuccessfully.

I was disturbed and exhausted by the time I reached home. I had even started regretting my decision of meeting that person in the first place. Just for some romance, I might have had risked my life. I sure had been greedy, for I was already getting a girlfriend even without him. I slapped myself a couple times for my carelessness.

After I was done, I rested myself on the desk which already had a Physics package of our class placed on it. As I was lying, my gaze inadvertently fell onto its back cover, and I began examining it. Too funny an event this was, for I had never in my whole, happier life ever read that, and now that there were serious problems present, I found myself having the leisure to read it.

There was nothing interesting, just a kind of advertisement of our classes. By that, I meant the previous years toppers and their results. All the people looked seriously nerdy, and only one of the girls was good looking. Most of the faces told that they must've been some serious isolated studying hermits, only coming out to attend their classes.

And there were some more names of the students whose photos they couldn't fit over the cover. Maybe I was reading them as a form of escapism from my troubles. There were some names that I had already heard, probably the time during my admission, when the center's counselors were boasting their achievements to lure us in. And then came one name which almost made me tumble out of my office chair.

I rubbed my eyes, as if I couldn't believe my sight. But it was true. I immediately messaged Mahi and Kartikeya.

"I have got a lead."

Mahi was the one to respond immediately, "What is it?"

"You know how our packages have the last year's toppers' names written on the back covers?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I just saw his name in one of them. Mandar Mandlekar, studied here for the past two years and attempted NEET last year. Succeeded with 700 marks and AIR 19."

"That's how he's been able to sneak in without any trouble!!"

"Yeah, but it's still absurd how they are allowing past year students in."

"So what now? Do we complain?"

"No, of course not. We have no idea what he'll do if he gets to know this. For now, let's just learn more about him."

"And how is that?"

"I know some people who studied here last year. Maybe I'll get something from them. I'll notify you tomorrow."

"Okay. Thanks for troubling yourself with this just to help me."

It wasn't only her who I was helping.

xxxxxxx

Okay, this step was going to be somewhat difficult. Because the person I knew was at somewhat of an odds with me. I knew he occasionally hung out on the terrace, so I waited there for him. Once he arrived, he seemingly ignored me and concentrated on his own activities.

I approached, "Hey, Asmay, how are you man?"

"Fuck off, Varun. Unless you want me to bang you yet another time."

"Dude, I'm here in peace. Actually, I want to repent for my mistake by treating you a McSpicy Chicken Burger. How's that?"

He gave a snort, "You, and repent? Cut the crap, dipshit. You obviously want something from me. And I'll only give it to you if you suck my dick."

Well, that wasn't practical.

"Come on, dude. I'm genuinely sorry for the fight. Don't you want a burger for free?"

"Thanks, but I have my own money to buy that. Are you gonna suck that dick or not?"

"Okay, how about I add a Black Forest McFlurry? Look, it's a really nice deal. That total costs like 500 rupees, and you'll be getting it without paying a paisa."

Asmay looked like he was about to protest, but he suddenly shut his mouth. He apparently contemplated for a moment.

"Ah, damn, I really like that shit. And had been really craving it for some time. Fine, but you better not act like a douche again."

"Absolutely."

So in went my 500 rupees as I stared at Asmay chomping on his burger. We both seemed to forget the true reason of our appointment, but he did reminisce about it once he took the taste of his McFlurry.

"Are you gonna keep staring at me? Spill it out, whatever it is that you want."

"You were at Prabodhan last year, right? Do you remember anyone named 'Mandar Mandlekar'?"

"Mandar Mandlekar? Of course, how could I forget him."

"Why? Was he your friend?"

"Phew, obviously not. He wasn't even in my batch. It was just that his name went viral once he committed suicide."

"Excuse me, what? Suicide?"

"Yeah. I know you must've heard that he got 700 and all, but still, he couldn't get into his dream college and dropped into depression. If you ask me, he was a total idiot."

"But is he really dead?"

"Didn't you hear me? By committing suicide, I mean to kill themselves. And I have never heard people come back alive after drowning themselves in a bucket."

The description was really not needed and marred my mind. But it was all more puzzling than before. Was this a ghost who was haunting us?

"Uhh... Do you have any more information about him or know anyone who does?"

"Nah, I told you, he wasn't even in my batch. I just heard about him when that incident got popular. And I barely remember anyone from the center anymore. But there's this, Nimish bhaiya, if he does still work there. He's the sort of person who'd help you if you grease his palm enough. If the previous year records are still in the center, then your work would be done."

"Okay, thanks."

"Buy me another McFlurry and I'll tell you a secret."

"Wha... shut up, I know you just want another free dessert but that is enough for my repentance."

xxxxxxx

The next day, I had Kartikeya by my side at the center. I had narrated to him all the events, and instructed him of our further plan.

"Nimish bhaiya, how are you doing? Must be tired, have this Frooti," Kartikeya handed the peon as we approached him.

"Oh, thanks. But what's with this hospitality, huh?" he questioned, plucking out the straw from the pack.

"Ah, nothing, just a small favor," I replied, "We need some simple details, like an address and phone number, of a student studying here last year."

He chuckled, "What the fuck? Why are you interested in such a thing? It is personal information and not permitted to be shared to just anyone."

"We have our reasons. And you might get yours too," I spoke as I handed him a box of Mivi ear pods that I was hiding behind.

"Oh, my... this is all..."

"So will you please get the details for us?" Kartikeya insisted.

Nimish bhaiya looked at us for a moment, then gazed around to make sure of our privacy.

"What is the name and batch?"

"Batch we aren't sure, but a medical one. And the name is Mandar Mandlekar," I explained.

"Okay. I'll see what I can do and report to you by the afternoon."

"We really hope that you do."

Because those earphones weren't too cheap. They took all of my pocket money, even some of my advanced one, since I had already blown some over Asmay. While Kartikeya did contribute, it was still modest according to his household. But it was all worth it. I could feel that we were getting closer to reveal the mystery.

Fortunately, that afternoon, a little later than our classes ended, Nimish bhaiya called us and handed us a number and an address. It wasn't too far from the center. So the 3 of us planned to take a bus to the spot. By the 3, I don't mean Nimish bhaiya. It was Mahi. She had insisted on joining us after learning about the situation, and made some arrangements to fool her mother.

"But the Matchmaker knows all 3 of us, right? Wouldn't it be risky for us to go to such a territory ourselves?" Mahi mentioned.

"That's right. We'll need a 4th person to do that who hasn't met with that psycho," Kartikeya suggested.

"What is the use of those morons who hang out with us?" I stated.

And in this manner, we managed to bring Umesh with us too. We hadn't revealed all the details to him, but educated him just enough. As we were waiting at the bus stop, my mobile started to ring. I pulled it out, and was surprised to see Sanika's name. I stepped aside to have some privacy.

"Hey, babe, what's up?" I began.

"Ah, that's what I wanted to talk with you. There have recently been a lot of interesting things happening around me."

"Umm... actually, I'm outside right now."

"Outside? Outside where? Haven't you reached home by now?"

"Yeah, the traffic is really bad today due to, some construction. And you know how the environment in the bus is. So I'll definitely call you once I reach ho..."

"Hey, is that supposed to be our bus, Varun?" Mahi cried from behind.

It indeed was.

"Varun, didn't you say you were already 'in the bus'? And whose voice was that?"

"Nothing, just a friend..."

"I know who it is!! It is that bitch you were double dating!! Are you fucking tricking me all this time? Had you only staged that break up? What's fucking wrong with you!!!"

"No, no, it's not like you think it is! You've got it all messed up!"

"If you want me to be with you, you will get away from her at this instant."

The bus had arrived at the stop.

"Varun, let's go, our bus is here!! C'mon quickly!!" Mahi yelled as she climbed in with the others.

I gazed at them blankly, bedazzled at what to do. What we were doing was definitely very crucial, and I couldn't abandon it just like that. I could've thought of an excuse, or pretended something, but the time was so short that I couldn't think of anything.

"I... I'm sorry, Sanika, but I have to go. There is this..."

"Are you fucking serious? You are choosing that cunt over me? After all these years that we've spent..."

"No, no, I'm not choosing her over you..."

"Don't you call me again, motherfucker!! Hope you never get into this college!!!" cursing, she hung up.

I had no time to work anything up as the bus was almost leaving. I swiftly sprinted and leapt to get in. The crowd in the bus and the stress of the task just completely ruined my mood after the call affair, and I stayed silent the whole of the ride.

Once our destination arrived, we stepped out and began locating the desired house. It was a worn out apartment by the name of Sunder Sahawas directly along the roadside. The 3 of us waited outside at a little distance, while I repeated the course of actions to Umesh.

"Who are you?"

"Umesh!"

"No, you idiot!! What will you tell the family?"

"Oh... I am an old school friend of Mandar, who had been away to the States. And when I came back a week ago, I got to know about this horrible tragedy, and thus decided to pay a visit."

"Good. Now go!"

He acted as if he was a commando sent on a special mission, which looked too childish. I was still silent due to the previous ordeal, and so were the other 2, as we waited for Umesh to arrive. I was conscious all the time in case the Matchmaker was actually around and would chance to spot us. But nothing like that sort happened.

Umesh soon returned, but his face didn't look content.

"Hey, guys, I think you got the wrong person."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the story of the suicide was all right, and the guy did study at Prabodhan, but it isn't the one that you showed me the photo of."

"Huh?" all 3 of us gasped.

I immediately took out my mobile, and showed the photo to him yet again.

"It wasn't this guy?"

"No, it wasn't!! While I was inside, I noticed some family photos, and noticed a different kind of guy. My doubts were cleared when the mother clearly mentioned the name while staring at a larger photo frame of his with a garland on it."

"Are you sure? Maybe he changed a little so you didn't recognize?" Kartikeya added.

"Of course not!! I'm not that dumb, okay. I can guarantee you a hundred percent that this was some different dude."

"Then what is the meaning of all this?" Mahi asked me.

I stared blankly at a wall, pondering, then concluded at once, "I think this means that our guy is living off someone else's identity."

"What the fuck... what are you talking about? Stolen identity? Who the hell are you behind?" Umesh was startled.

"It's no one. Thank you Umesh for your time, but you can go now."

20. Amyra

November, Thursday, 10th

It was Thursday, the day of our college fest. Our associated college wasn't much to brag of, but thankfully it was that generous to arrange us a fest. This was the only day I could be free to roam outside without too much control and surveillance from my parents.

I wore the best dress that I had. An emerald green kurti above plain white leggings. My hair was fragrant and naturally curled, and I even sprayed on a little Yardley. All the while my father drove me on his Pulsar, he was continuously giving instructions on how to behave myself and be cautious, as if I was 7.

The destination was Swarna Theatre, exactly on the gate of which was someone I was very anxious to see at the moment was waiting. Vedraj was clad in a dark purple jacket with a white t-shirt inside, above a pair of dark black cargo pants. His hair for some reason was the sexiest of his character. I nervously walked towards him, afraid of my father.

Thankfully, Vedraj had enough sense to not act as if he knew me. Once my father bid me farewell from the distance and zoomed his bike away, Vedraj threw his hand around my waist that triggered the blush over my face.

"You're absolutely stunning today, my darling," he admired.

"Thanks. You too... are looking handsome."

"Ah, I always do. And I always will, only for you," and the way he winked after that almost gave me a myocardial infarction.

At once, we all headed inside to watch the performances set for the fest. The surrounding inside was dark, and the only light sprang from the stage. The anchoring seemed to have already begun, and now some dance was about to start. It was difficult to watch our steps in there.

Just then, someone began flashing their mobile torch from a corner and calling out to Vedraj. He returned the call, and escorted me in that direction. Upon reaching, the guy gestured us towards a few empty seats to sit down. The theater wasn't that of lavish, but the atmosphere gave me chills across my spine.

I was so glad that I had come to see this. I rarely ever got out of my house and did things other than study or those skilled hobbies that my parents often pressurized me to keep my interest in. From dances, singing and musicals, to stand up comedy, fashion shows and even roasting battles, this experience of fest was completely different from those in the school. I regretted not coming to this last year.

The fest was going on perfectly, but suddenly, Vedraj got up in the middle and left. I figured he must have had to pee, but he took longer. Maybe he had to poop? I didn't know whether boys were comfortable doing that in the public toilets. But when he returned, he instead urged me to go with him.

Confused, I left an entertaining skit in the middle and exited into the corridors. Vedraj guided me through several turns, and we came in front of what I deciphered to be the boys washroom. Two guys were standing outside, one of whom gave a thumbs up to Vedraj. He merely nodded as a response, and led me inside. I was utterly shocked and embarrassed at this act, fearing to catch some guy relieving himself inside.

But the washroom was totally empty. There was only the faint sound of the performances, and a tap dripping as an ambience.

"Why are we here?" I questioned.

"To have fun," he murmured.

He dragged my arm and made me sit on the counter, before putting both of his arms around me to lock me around. I realized where this was going. Vedraj wished to get intimate. This was the first time I was about to kiss someone. But... I wasn't ready. I mean, I admit that I was the one who caused this relationship, but it just wasn't the right time. Not especially with Vedraj simply pressing it onto me like that.

I instinctively just let go of myself, letting my body in Vedraj's control. He pushed me behind onto the mirror, and slowly brought his face closer to me. There he stopped as he touched my nose with his, and let his warm breath onto me. He directed his arms to clutch my body tightly, and soon started to slip his hands slowly inside my kurti. I was still submitting myself to Vedraj to let him please himself.

But something suddenly kicked into my mind. The conversation with the Matchmaker struck in. It was Vedraj who wanted this, and not me.

Instantly, I blocked him for further advances with my hands, and gently forced him away. He seemed astonished.

"Why... what's wrong?" he asked.

"I, umm, am actually not ready for this... right now."

"What? Are you serious? We're just kissing!! It's not like you'll get pregnant."

"I know, but I just... I don't know, I'm not sure. This is my first ever relationship, and I wish to take it slow."

"How much slower do you want to go? And what's the fucking point of a relationship if you're not going to be intimate?!"

"What... what do you mean by that? Do you want to say, that a relationship is nothing without lust? Is that all there is in it?"

"Don't you start this, okay!! Don't you start twisting my words!! You're just being too paranoid. I did this special arrangement to make it comfortable for you, and this is what I get?"

Well, a guys washroom wasn't the most comfortable of all places.

"You better stop with your childish tantrums!! You are nothing but a nerdy scholar who is just fucking timid and afraid to do anything. All those girls before you yearned to taste these lips, and you dare to refuse them just like that? Get lost, you bitch!!"

I wasn't planning on staying there anyways. I could feel the water fill up in my eyes and my heart slowly crack into fragments. I hadn't ever expected this side of Vedraj. I swiftly paced out of the

room and returned to the main hall of the theater. Fortunately, the darkness shielded my expressions, allowing me to get a hold of myself. I didn't go to my old seat, and instead sat in a blank one in the middle row.

I tried hard to balance the shock by distracting myself with the vivid performances. When I was calmed down a little, a girl was performing some nice comical standup about the life of teenagers. I finally even gave a laugh.

A few moments later, the person sitting beside me got up, and to my disappointment, Vedraj filled their place. We both sat a minute in silence.

"Hey, I'm sorry for before," he uttered.

I didn't say anything, and simply stared towards the show.

"I know that I shouldn't have rushed it, and absolutely not talk all that shit later on. I'm an idiot. And I promise that it won't repeat again and we'll do it however you want... even if it takes you several years to be ready."

Upon noticing that I still wasn't paying heed, he rummaged on his other side. Suddenly, a chocolate pastry was placed in my lap.

"I know it's your favorite," he whispered.

And damn it was. In this manner, we patched up rather easily and quickly, and found ourselves enjoying the fest. It took a couple more hours till early evening to be over. We exited, commenting about all the performances that took place.

"That guy who played the tabla seemed so ugly and nerdy... I bet he hasn't even ever approached a girl, let alone talk to one."

I slapped his arm lightly, "Don't say like that. Everyone is different. He will find his person one day when the time is right."

Vedraj didn't seem to agree, and gave a hearty laugh. But before I could continue, someone else caught his attention.

"Hey, Vedraj!! Where the hell were you sitting?" a girl asked.

"Right around the middle, Maitreyi. What about you? And what the fuck is wrong with your batch? I didn't see anyone from there take part in the performances."

"The hell are you saying!! Didn't you fucking see me in the hip hop dance?" another girl replied.

Vedraj apparently had forgotten about me for the moment, and focused on the group of girls. And I will gladly admit that it made me feel jealous and unamused. But also, I felt a pang of unfairness. Vedraj could assert it on me to not talk with other boys, while he himself did so without any hesitation.

I felt alienated and alone as I waited for them to be done. Gratefully, the girls bid him goodbye after some time, and he seemed to remember that he had a girlfriend to accompany. But I was still silent, for I wasn't used to speaking up to him.

Yet, I didn't wish to continue to be the same. The burning of the jealousy in my heart was forcing its way out.

"Why... Why were you talking to those girls?" I managed to utter.

"Huh? What do you mean why? Just as everyone talks to each other."

"But, you said, that it didn't look nice when I talked to other boys. Then how is it that you talk to other girls?"

"The fuck..." he looked like he was about to erupt in rage, but controlled it inside.

"You have no idea what kind of bastards boys are. All they have in their minds while talking to a girl is imagining how she looks without her clothes on. If a boy tries to talk to a girl, it's only because he's interested."

"And... Why can't it be the same the other way around? Why wouldn't girls talk to a guy without imagining him... Whatever you said. Why won't they be interested in him?"

Vedraj's face clearly told that he was about to yell in some kind of argument. But surprisingly, he appeared to suppress it.

"You know what, we've already fought too much for today. Fine, let's agree this. I won't talk to any other girl, while you won't talk to any other boy. Is that fine with you now?"

I nodded, smiling lightly.

"And that includes the guy you study with after class."

"Who?" I was confused for the moment.

"Don't act dumb! I know a lot of people around, and they've reported to me about you sitting with some weirdo. Till now, I excused it believing it to be important for your study. But since we are agreeing to this condition, let's be fair."

That was when I realized he was talking about the Matchmaker. Nevertheless, I agreed to him, and he again put his hand around my waist as we went for a stroll.

xxxxxxx

It had been a few days that I hadn't visited the Matchmaker. I was afraid of someone spotting me again, and I couldn't meet him outside the center. I already often made excuses to meet Vedraj, and I couldn't afford to do so more.

I wasn't taking the deadline seriously and had even almost forgotten about it, until one day, a certain person called me. He was sitting right across the class, but I could understand that it was due to Vedraj's effects.

"Hey, Amyra, what's up? " Kartikeya greeted.

I was reluctant to speak to him due to the agreement. But since Vedraj wasn't around and it would've looked rude, I decided to pay a little attention to him.

"Ah, nothing, just busy nowadays in the study. Hanging out with Vedraj has tightened the available time for test preparations."

"Oh, okay... But listen, I wanted to tell you something important."

He then explained to me all the weird and scary details that he had learnt about the Matchmaker in connection with the dead girls. It instantly gave me goosebumps, and my heart was already racing.

"Just make sure to behave with him and be on time. When is your deadline?"

"It's... Tomorrow," I gulped.

"Oh, crap... Then you better get done with it today itself. This is very serious and you better not take it lightly. But don't worry too much, and don't say any of this in front of him. Okay?"

I could now see Vedraj around the doorway.

"Okay, sure, I'll take care. Bye, have to go now," saying I cut the call.

Vedraj soon took a seat beside me, thankfully not asking anything about the call. He seemed to be exhilarated.

"Listen, I've planned an amazing date for us tomorrow. After the class, we'll be going to the Gamezone Arcade."

I would've been excited too, if it hadn't been for the recent danger that I had learned of. If I did wait for self study today, I might not get a chance tomorrow, and even if I did, someone might spot me in here and report it to Vedraj. I was totally puzzled and anxious.

But then I decided to somehow manage it tomorrow itself.

xxxxxx

Even the wind dashing me on Vedraj's bike didn't blow away my fear. I was still very worried and afraid about doing it all on time. Vedraj occasionally questioned me about my odd behavior, but I excused it by saying it were periods.

To be frank, I wasn't that big of a fan of an arcade, but I enjoyed spending time with Vedraj. He showed me a lot of different types of video games. Car racing, alien shooting, dancing and air hockey. I wasn't good in any of them and hardly won against Vedraj. But it sure was amazing.

Sadly, I wasn't able to enjoy it for long. I had been constantly watching the time, thinking when would be the right time to leave. Finally, at a point, I kept my word forward.

"What? Why so early?" Vedraj groaned.

"My parents, you know them. They... Want some help with me for preparations... For some guests that will be arriving."

"But it's not that late. You can still reach in time. We've just started."

"I'm sorry, but I really do have to leave. I promise to be there next time."

Vedraj looked at me disappointedly, but finally agreed. He offered to drop me, but I refused on the pretext of my parents discovering it. Well, actually it wasn't a pretext, it would've been true either way.

After making sure that I wasn't in Vedraj's sight, I quickly hailed an autorickshaw and told him to drive to the destination that I had picked up. It was a park in my vicinity, which was deep inside the alleys. And during the afternoon, rarely a soul wandered around.

But when I reached, it was empty. There was no one around. The MM was always the first one to arrive. I messaged him once again asking his whereabouts.

"Your time is up," came the reply.

My heart was jumping out of fear, "What? What do you mean? It's Wednesday, exactly a week later."

"But our earlier session was discharged at 4 pm, and it's 4:15 now."

"It's just 15 minutes!! Please, let's just get over with it."

"I already stated it the very first day. Not a second later than the deadline. 7 days is already a sufficient limit. Goodbye."

I repeatedly texted him, but none of them were to be read. Remembering Kartikeya's words, I was utterly terrified of the future. I didn't wish to die like Aruna or SK.

But before I could do anything, I began hearing the rumbling of leaves that grew by the moment. It was Vedraj, and he didn't look happy.

"Oh, so meeting with that guy is so much important to you than our date now, is it?"

"No, no, you've bee..."

"Shut the fuck up, you wench!! I read your texts when you had handed me your phone while you went dancing. I planned to trail you and teach that bastard a lesson, but he seems to be missing."

He then approached me with extreme fury radiating from him. For the first time, I was truly scared of him. He then tightly held me by the arms, and pushed me onto a tree.

"You need to be shown what I really am. What it means to be with me. It's only because you haven't tasted me that you don't realize my worth."

"No, Vedraj, please, stop..."

But he began forcing his lips onto me. When I tried to push him away, he instead slapped me.

"Stay fucking quiet, bitch!!"

When I attempted to escape, he grabbed me by the throat, and began undressing me. I kept pleading but it went all unheard. And along with that, my vision blurred as Vedraj's grip tightened on my windpipe.

Soon, I couldn't even feel what he was doing with my body. The pain of the grip was also dwindling, as my consciousness itself was, until it finally blacked out to oblivion.

21. Kartikeya

November, Tuesday, 8th

"Hey, babe. You mad still?" I texted as I laid on my bed.

The whole day, Satbeer had perfectly managed to avoid interacting with me in any major way. So I figured this to be the only way left. It took sometime for him to read, and further to reply.

"Listen to me, let's just stop this all. Let's just be friends like before."

"Friends like before? Can we ever go back to that? After all this, we can either be lovers or nobody."

"What is fucking wrong with you?! Don't you understand!! We can't be like this if we want to be accepted and respected in society. Everyone will treat us like shit!"

"Why is that all you think about? Do you want to be a loser always? Where's that Satbeer who'd fight any fuckin' body for his buddies? If you want to be in peace, you have to make sure you get it."

"But why have you become like this? You were fine earlier, and now suddenly, you want to be some kind of a spokesperson or a freedom fighter! My family will literally disown me if they came to know, and I can't afford losing my entire life because of some teenage fun."

"Teenage fun? Is that what I am to you? Won't you lose anything of your life if you lose me? If you lose us?"

"I don't want to abandon you, I just want to abandon this... thing that we have in between us. You aren't grasping the reality of the situation because of your selfishness. Wait..."

My further messages went unread, and in came back a link to an apparent news article. I clicked to go onto the site, and began reading the incident.

It talked about a boy stoned to death in a nearby village for being suspected as a homosexual. It later turned out that he was just autistic, and a lot of the villagers were arrested. The article was shocking for sure. I felt bad for the specially abled kid, and at the same time, intense fury towards the society for their thinking and response. While I was reading, Satbeer had already given his replies.

"I don't want anyone of us to be the next on the news, Kartik. This is it, I'm ending whatever this was. I don't wish to be part of this anymore and let it destroy both of our lives. Let's just stay how God made us, and not how we want to."

"This is how God has made us!!"

"God doesn't make anyone despicable."

That was right, I wanted to say. God didn't, but people did. But it had occurred to me that there was no use in persuading him anymore. I knew him very well, and I could tell when he was absolutely adamant with his decision. So I simply placed the mobile down, not submitting but taking time to come up with a solution.

Despite the determination, my brain simply wasn't that highly qualified to have that sort of knowledge and cognition. So I turned towards my only other friend for help. I dialed his number, and waited for him to pick up.

"Yo, what's up? What reminds you of me?"

"I wanted your opinion in a problem. The thing is, Satbeer isn't too comfortable with our relationship, and he is saying that he doesn't want to continue this. He feels that this is too risky."

Varun was quiet for a moment or 2, before uttering, "Uhh... I'm not sure what exactly to tell you, because I'm not very well versed with dating boys. But I guess, you do need to be careful, considering how people around are."

"Just... tell me as if it was a girl. Imagine yourself in my place and Mahi instead of Satbeer. What would you do?"

"Hmm... I would have made her realize my worth. Made sure that she knew what she was losing and how priceless it was, compared to whatever social shit she put first."

"But how? How exactly do I do that?"

"Uhh... see, I'm no wise sage, nor too experienced in this stuff as I'm myself in my first ever relationship. But I'll say that simple and honest things are definitely not going to work out. You need to twist around a little to make sure things fall in their places. At least, that's how the Matchmaker explained to me. He said something like, the mind doesn't see what actually is, but what it wants to see. Does it seem helpful?"

"What it wants to see... or what it doesn't."

"Huh?"

"Excellent, Varun!! Thank you for the idea!"

"Wait, wait, what idea exactly? What popped into your mind?"

"The truth is that I'll always love Satbeer. But if I show it to him differently, he might be convinced. If I show that he's not the one I want, that he has already begun losing me and we might break apart easily, he might change his mind."

"And what 'exactly' do you mean by that?"

"That means, there is a need for a 3rd wheel to spark some jealousy."

"What? 3rd person? Where are you going to find a gay guy in this vast metropolitan? Would those apps help?"

"Who said it needed to be a guy? Besides, it would be too difficult that ways to locate and convince one, and they rarely used apps. Be it a guy or a girl, the final effect would be the same. Or at least that is how I hope."

"Wow... that seems to be, somewhat effective. Really astonishing that you're so apt in these matters but not academics."

xxxxxxx

There were not a lot of girls that I was in contact with. Neither I had any romantic interest in them, nor I wasn't more comfortable around my own gender peers. So my only option was, once again, Varun.

He set me up with one he was familiar with, on a conditional basis. She was to pretend to be my girlfriend for a few days in exchange for me completing all of her college journals. And if you think that it was comparatively nothing, let me inform you about my still sore hand due to only half the completion of my own journals.

Her name was Kshitija, and was in the same batch as Varun. She was somewhat chubby, porcelain skin and 2 neat plaits. She didn't seem to be the best, but I needed to be satisfied with what I got. She was rather annoyed all the time, and didn't get along with me at all.

And she only opted to roam around and talk with me, without any type of touch. I ignored Satbeer most of the time to make it look like I was preferring her company over his.

One day, I had persuaded her to accompany me as the classes ended. She went on spitting facts about the Selena and Hailey feud, while I focused on my surroundings. Satbeer was there, on a side, and I could see through my peripheral vision that he had some heed towards me. But it didn't seem to affect him much. I felt the urge to add something, to escalate the act and make it shake the fuck out of him.

"Quick, give me a hug," I whispered to Kshitija.

She seemed to be puzzled after being interrupted abruptly, "Huh?"

"I said, hug me!"

"Wh... what? Are you fucking kidding me? No way!!"

"Oh come on, we have a deal!"

"I'm not fuckin' embracing you for a couple journals! I'd rather write them on my own."

"Oh, please!! I'll get you momos or whatever you want afterwards!!"

"Eww, please. I don't eat with hooligans. Who knows when was the last time you even took a bath?"

"Okay, that's an exaggeration. I don't smell or appear that bad, and for the record, I have bathed today! Now please, just listen to me this once, and I'll even... set you up with someone. I know a lot of people, especially a guy who can..."

"Listen, neither I am on a look out for a boyfriend, and in absolutely no hell, I am about to hug you! Now excuse me, but I want to rush home."

"It'd be quick..." I muttered, as I leaned in and took a hold of her.

I thought that embracing her tightly would make her concur and give in, but she just grew more agitated and jerked violently. When I was finally broken off, she pushed me away hard.

"Stay the fuck away from me, you pervert!!" she loudly exclaimed, enough to gather attention.

"And don't ever come to me again!! I can write my journals on my own! And I also have a younger sister for that!!" declaring, she stormed away.

Everyone, including Satbeer, were staring at me. Some genuinely inquisitive, while some simply sniggering and passing remarks or enjoying my insult. I quickly hurried away to avoid being back the fool of Prabodhan. I was quiet the whole bus ride, processing all the events, problems, and their answers.

Once I had reached home, my mobile notified me of Satbeer's texts. Finally, it had arrived, although it confused me due to the latest failure.

"So now into girls too, huh?"

"If no boy is wanting to get in a relationship, then what else can I do?"

"Cut the performance, Mr. Oscar. You are so bad at acting that I instantly identified your true game. Plus, your partner was such an asshole which simply made it more difficult for you."

I stared silently towards the message, mentally cursing myself over my failure and fearing that he would continue to disappear from my life.

"It showed how incompatible she was for you, and in fact, just anyone else, other than me. And without me, you would be left either lonely or miserable chasing such incompatible partners. But I don't wish to leave you to that fate."

"What? Are you saying you'll get back?"

"Hold up. I am not saying we should come out of the closet in front of the world. But, let's continue to be in a relationship. If you promise to be not too hasty and inconsiderate, then only will I promise to stop acting cowardly. We both need to maintain the right amount of balance to sustain this perfectly."

"So am I still just a teenage fun for you?"

"No, not at all. You never were. I'm sorry for saying that. But I love you, and I won't ever find someone else like you who would match me either. Just as I had said, I'd fight with anyone for my buddies."

"Did you just say that you love me?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"I love you too."

xxxxxxx

It was soon after that the whole center was turned upside down. There had already been certain incidents, like the deaths of Mahi's friends. But they weren't enough to stir disturbance in the lives of all of the students at Prabodhan. Vedraj was a lot influential name comparatively. And when the news came in, everyone was just shook. Plus the incident itself was so grotesque that even the center staff was forced to take necessary steps, like sex-wise segregation and sex-education lectures and all.

Vedraj had been accused of simultaneously raping and murdering Amyra. But I very well knew who was the actual cause behind this all. I distinctly remembered her tell me that her deadline was yesterday, and I had heard of Vedraj taking her out. I had thought that she would manage, but turned out I was wrong.

There was no way that this was all a coincidence. There was no reason for Vedraj to act so spontaneously. Certainly a factor had driven everything to their places. And I had taken enough of it. I couldn't bear the loss of my friend, and the true criminal roam free out there. He needed to get what he deserved. And I didn't want him to target me, Varun or someone else next. He needed to be stopped.

I confronted Varun in the recess, after our little unsuccessful adventure of uncovering the Matchmaker's truth.

"I want to end this once and for all. Let's fuck him up," I stated.

"But how? Don't you see how powerful he is? He can literally make anyone do anything."

"No, he fucking cannot. At least, not as much as we believe him to. Or else he wouldn't have been hiding and sneaking like that."

"Maybe that's right. But I don't guess snitching on him would do us good. Instead, it just might give him more time to plan to kill us."

"Exactly. That's why, I propose we should do this our way. Gather all our lads and just tackle him at once."

Varun still seemed hesitant, "We better round up a lot of them, because we can't underestimate his power. I have his appointment due anyway, so I'll call him to the spot we choose."

So the plan was set. But the twist was, no one would have agreed to accompany us to this, because of the already tense situation due to Vedraj. Therefore, we had to convince them that the Matchmaker had somehow set Vedraj up in this case. Umesh's testimony of the earlier day helped us to build the emphasis.

And boys were boys. Some persuasion finally made them ready to fight. We would have been around 10 guys, which seemed enough. Varun finalized the appointment on his regular spot to avoid any suspicion, which was at the backside of his society, which further led into rural areas and farmlands.

It was pretty solitary, and we took cover around, waiting for our target. I had expected him to be the first as usual, but surprisingly, he and Varun arrived together this time. Taking the cue, we exposed ourselves and surrounded him from all sides. But he didn't have a bit of a look of surprise on his face.

"You seem to fail to recall that I had stated that any incomppliance or an attempt at forced disruption of this deal or violence against me will serve as a breach of cont..."

"Fuck you, and your contract, you son of a bitch!!" I yelled, letting out all of my rage.

"You dare to hurt our Vedraj bhai?! You won't be leaving on two legs!!" Nischay growled.

"Every single thing has consequences," was all that the Matchmaker said.

But before we could all proceed, there was another set of movements from the nearby bushes. Everyone was surprised as a group of elder guys was revealed, some of them even carrying hockey sticks and bats.

"Tejas bhaiya? What are you doing here?" Satbeer cried, making me notice the mentioned person.

"Good that you keep your Snapchat location on. What the fuck is up with you, huh?! This your friend? Kartikeya?" he pointed at me.

"When you left your phone on the table yesterday, your father read all of your chats and saw all kinds of dirty and unnatural things you both discuss. Hence, he has sent us to correct you. How the fuck did you get into all this, Satbeer? Didn't you even think about the family honor once? What would be your father's reputation if everyone knew that his son was a fucking faggot?!!"

Satbeer was now pale, his valor completely disappeared. He was trembling as he replied.

"It... It was all him!" he pointed to me.

"He brought me into all this. He convinced me that this was very... Rebellious, and a fun thing that teenagers do nowadays, and so I fell for his words. I am sorry, Tejas bhaiya, I'm really sorry."

I couldn't believe this coming out from his mouth, "What the fuck are you saying, Satbeer!!"

"Hey, shut the fuck up, you cunt!! We'll deal with you later Satbeer, but right now, we need to look after this manipulator here," Tejas bhaiya glared at me.

"Everybody!! Leave at once and don't dare to speak this to anyone if you don't wish to result in the same fate!!"

Like scared kittens, all of our group scampered away. Varun and the Matchmaker had been already missing. Tejas bhaiya now grabbed me by the collar, and thrust me to the ground.

"You fuckin' slumdog, you find it fun to deceive and corrupt those higher than you, do you?"

He began kicking me, and by the next moment, the whole of his gang was onto me, some even using their weapons. The pain was so agonizing, that I couldn't even recall when it all began to numb out.

22. Varun

Thursday, 16th, November

I tried once again to contact Sanika, but in vain. Since yesterday, she was either constantly cutting my calls, ignoring my texts, or occasionally telling me to screw myself. By today, she had blocked me over most of the platforms. I was really anxious about mending this. The Matchmaker had already warned me last time that this was beyond his control, and Sanika looked really mad as this was the second time.

But right now, I had a more crucial task to be done. I swore to myself to win her back after getting done with this. My confederates had already taken their positions, and now it was my time to head in. As far, the Matchmaker oddly hadn't arrived yet. While I trod to the spot, I continuously ruminated over whether this was a good idea.

I mean, there was this one time, when we had even taken over a few adult college guys. But the Matchmaker was different. And he frankly scared me, especially after learning the horrible events that happened with Vedraj and his girlfriend.

I suddenly stopped thinking everything, as if fearing that it would be heard or read, when once my gaze fell onto the skinny figure standing at the side of the road playing with a coin. He would usually be waiting at the spot, but for some reason, he was on my route this time.

I had already concluded that he must've found out about our plan, but still approached him keeping my expressions hidden.

"Wow, not today at our spot?" I asked, the only natural thing to do.

"Well, astonishingly, I had a little delay due to some inconvenience, and then I took notice of you heading in the same direction. Thus I opted to wait for you to go along with."

He said that rather casually, and I strongly hoped that he hadn't got a sniff of anything. I gave him a smile and started walking, trying my best not to let any of my emotions be visible to him.

Once we reached our location, our group soon emerged from their hiding and surrounded us from all the sides. But instead of the Matchmaker, it was me who was sweating after witnessing his solemn and fearless face. The group and he exchanged some threats, but he didn't flinch still. Then, he abruptly threw the coin in his hand to the ground so hard that it literally bounced back right into his hand. I had never seen anyone do that.

Before any action could take place, another gang of adult guys appeared out of the bushes. They hadn't even breathed a word out, that I already had realized that this was the Matchmaker's setting and we had made a grave mistake by plotting against him.

"Listen, I'm, I'm really sorry. I know I shouldn't have done this, I was just scared!! Please, just give me a chance... I'll do anything to make up!" I begged the stoic devil.

"Well, if you wish to atone for your stupidity, you better escort me away from this location at this instant. Swiftly but discreetly, in a way that no one realizes our absence."

I nodded, and put an arm through his and began pacing away quietly through the bushes. I felt so bad to leave my friends behind, that tears had already formed in my eyes. I was mad from the worry of what would happen to them. Those elder guys didn't at all seem in the mood for any talk. I constantly cursed myself for my concurrence to the idea and not foreseeing this. This dude was definitely not human, even though he acted to be one.

"Swallow in your misery, Varun. Look at this," he made me stop after a distance and flashed his mobile screen showing a location on Google Maps, "Hail any sort of cab to get us there. I expect you to pay the fare."

I didn't dare to question or say anything to him, and obeyed him like a dog. All the while our ride in the rickshaw, I was trembling with fear of his further intentions, while he was perfectly solemn just as he always was, still juggling his coin between the fingers.

The destination was some sort of barren ground hidden in the midst of buildings and dense thickets. As soon as I saw the person already waiting at the place, I was left aghast, but no word

came out of my throat due to the previous traumatization. The Matchmaker seemed to read my mind and answered the doubt on his own.

"She's here because I messaged her to."

Mahi looked equally scared, slowly creeping towards us like an abandoned kitten.

"What... What does she have to do with all this? Just leave her alone, she has nothing to do with this," I finally spat out.

"Don't make the same mistake of belittling my abilities yet again. I'm very well acquainted with all of your activities. I have brought you both together at this place to present you with a final warning to stop meddling in my business and scheming against me. Whatever you believe that you can do is absolutely false, and you can in no sense overpower me. It's better for all of us to stay on good terms by abiding by our only deal faithfully.

All of your friends simply received the penalties already stated in our contract. I'm doing you a favor by not sentencing you to the same results and giving you another opportunity to redeem yourselves. For redemption, both of you must continue having our appointments before the deadlines without any tribulations, and keep living your life normally."

A particular statement of his took me and Mahi by surprise.

"Wait, what do you mean by both? Why does she need to?" I exclaimed.

"Ohh... Of course, you both have the reasons to hide it from each other. Well, whatever, there's no mention of secrecy or anything in the contract so it doesn't fret me. That is now your issue to discuss."

Before I could say anything, Mahi began, "So, you went to him too? For whom? Me?"

It then all hit me at once. The reason I had suddenly started to crush on another girl after chasing Sanika for all these years was this.

"You bitch!!" I growled, "This... This all is because of you!! It's because of you that I had to swing between you and Sanika, and that's why she's slipping away from me!! We were always meant to be together, and you fucking came in between!"

Mahi was suddenly taken back by my outrage.

"Was... Was she the one you asked for? I am sorry... I didn't know..."

Not wanting to continue in this disruptive love triangle, I turned towards the controller for help.

"Hey, this... This isn't fair!! She can't matchmake with me while I'm already matchmaking with someone else!!"

"There isn't any such condition mentioned in our deal," was all he stated gravely.

"But one of your deals is negatively affecting another of yours!! You should sort it out!"

"My part ends at provoking the targets towards my clients... how their lives proceed and whether they overlap is none of my concern. That is for you to figure out how to organize. At one point after my effects, you did develop feelings towards Mahi to keep yourself content, but it was your own exploit to chase after yet another girl."

"But how can you get to control someone's mind like that!! That is fucking wrong and unjust!"

"Oh, is it now? Wasn't it when you came to me to entice Sanika towards you?"

He had got me there. There didn't seem any way out of this. I didn't dare project my anger onto him, so I turned towards the only other person present there.

"Your choices have dragged me into all this mess!! Neither would you have selected me, nor would I've felt the need to contact this person!! You fucking poked into my life and ruined it all!!" I yelled at the frightened girl.

I took some quick steps towards her, and was about to slap the fuck out of her, when the Matchmaker held my hand back. His grip wasn't any sturdy, but I didn't dare disobey him.

"There has been enough violence today already. And both of your 60 minutes are still pending, so I'll suggest that you better focus on your objectives instead of letting your minds loose in these useless sentiments."

I panted heavily, as I exchanged glances from the cowering girl to the serious weirdo. I finally let myself down, and chose to go first for the appointment.

xxxxxxx

I hadn't slept properly that night. The day's events were too stressful to let me dream in peace. I isolated myself from everyone as much as possible, and spent the day binge eating, gaming, working out or masturbating. But they were nothing more than band-aids.

The next day, the police were present at the center. Apparently, Kartik was reported to be missing after not arriving home that day. I very strongly believed him to be already dead. I tried to enquire Satbeer about Kartik's fate, but he completely avoided the topic, appearing very scared and miserable. I soon understood the cause of his behavior after having a talk with the others.

But there was nothing like usual. Our group wasn't lively at all, and everyone was quiet and mostly alone or with their close cliques. Especially me, for I didn't interact with anyone at all, even Satbeer, partially blaming him for abandoning Kartikeya like that. Then true to my fears, the police came interrogating us. Everyone was tense, some even visibly trembling while talking to them.

The police weren't pressurizing anyone, especially Satbeer, considering his family influences to keep the matter low.

"So you didn't meet him that day at all?" a policeman enquired me in a vacant room.

"No, sir."

"You have any idea where he could have gone to? Was he having any disputes or trouble?"

"Not that I knew of."

"Okay, fine. Answer one last question, where were you yesterday afternoon?"

This caught me off guard. I hadn't prepared for any such sort of questionnaire. I mentally regretted my stupidity, and began searching for an excuse.

"I... was with my other friend... Mahi! We were hanging out at the Momo Joint."

I didn't know why I had answered a days old event, but it was what came to my mind. I was really anxious if they tried to crosscheck, yet I tried my best to appear truthful.

"Fine. You're good to go. And stay safe, there have been a lot of incidents in here. Don't get into unnecessary conflicts with anyone," he expressed, calling out for the next student.

I was completely distracted the whole class, blankly scribbling on my notes, earning me subtle scolds from teachers of both the lectures. During the departure afterwards, I got into a fight with one of the younger lads, totally disregarding the warning the policeman gave me. I agree that he had accidentally bumped into me, but my disturbed mind wasn't wanting to leave it alone. I had overpowered him and caused his mouth to bleed with punches, before the others stopped me.

This wasn't just a simple school that would have neglected such trivial incidents. This was Prabodhan. They even took absentees seriously. My parents were called, and the day just turned totally worse. I had another fit of anger in the staff room as everyone around simply called out on my actions. My father slapped me in front of everyone, which finally tranquilized me.

Then there was a different session back at home, which I managed to not breakdown in and convince my parents that I was to obey whatever they told. The situation soon calmed down, and being the neurosurgeon my father was, he believed that gadgets like mobiles just boosted up my aggression. Thus, I was left alone in my room, with the options to either study, or read some books that my father offered.

When I thought of a solution, Sanika appeared in front of my eyes. But she wasn't going to talk to me at all. So, I urged Meena to sneak her mobile up to me, and used it to dial Sanika's number.

"So you're using Meenudi's number now? How more fucking selfish can you get?" was the first thing I heard.

I literally began crying, "Sanika, please, just give me one more chance. If you give me the time to explain, you'll learn that none of this was my fault!!"

"Not your fault? Then what? Does someone have some kind of nanobots inside you controlling your actions?"

"Something like that!! There is this person with magical powers who used it to pair me with Mahi on her request!! I am just as mad as you are, or even more!"

Sanika merely chuckled, "Rather than cooking up that whimsical story, you could've just been honest and said everything to my face. I thought you to be that brave."

"This is the truth, Sanika!! Trust me!! I am the victim here. I have been manipulated and misled..." the call cut before I could even complete.

After some tries, I understood that she wasn't about to contact me anytime soon. My friends and freedom had already been snatched from me, and I couldn't bear losing her either. I tried dialing Mahi's number to force her to clean the shit she made, but she ghosted me either. So I had to force myself to read Wings of Fire.

xxxxxxxx

My life had started to fall apart as the days passed. Nothing seemed to be the same as it was before meeting the Matchmaker. Before I made the deal with him. Before Mahi made the deal with him, somehow indirectly causing to do mine. I wasn't sure how, but I knew that it would've all been avoided if Mahi hadn't accepted that.

The latest test had a considerably different result due to my affected studies. My social status was totally disrupted, and I was no more than a fucking sociopath. Even if I tried to suppress my overflowing frustration, it seeped out one way or the other. Just recently, I had flung my mobile at the wall, and had to take great care for either of my parents not discovering its horrible crack.

They wouldn't have made a big deal out of it usually, but due to the recent events, they might've brought back the gadget inhibition rule.

I knew that the answer to all of this was Sanika, but unless Mahi had me bound, I was trapped. I couldn't bear it anymore, and decided to confront her at last.

In the recess, I quietly approached her. Upon facing me, she tried to flee, but I was persistent.

"Listen, I'm not here to hurt you!! I have good news!! Just listen to me! I have found a way to set us free from the Matchmaker!! Just hear me once!"

She reluctantly agreed to me, and I took her to a solitary corner on the pretext of confidentiality. As soon as I made sure we were alone, I pinned her by the shoulders to the wall.

"Varun... What is this? Why are you holding me?" she whimpered.

"Shut up bitch, and listen to me carefully. You are going to stop meeting the Matchmaker, understood?"

"But he'll kill me if I don't!"

"And you're killing me by doing so!"

"Why can't we just try to compromise our lives a little?! I'm already doing it. I haven't said a word about your cheating on me."

"You don't have any fucking right to say anything!! You are the fucking culprit, the one to blame for everything!! None of this would have happened if you would have been a little sane!"

"How is all of this entirely my fault!! I certainly didn't tell you to..."

But before she could continue, I tightened my grip around her, harshly thumping her once on the wall to quieten her up.

"Hey!! What the hell are you doing over there!! Get off of her!" a voice yelled, and a pair of hands separated me from Mahi.

"You okay, girl?" Nimish bhaiya tended to her, "You aren't hurt anywhere right?"

She shook her head with teary eyes.

"Let's give you a glass of water, c'mon," he sent her ahead.

Then, he turned to me, whispering, "I'm letting you off the hook this time. But you know how strict this facility is after your last upheaval. Better not go around repeating it if you want to stay out of trouble, especially with females."

As he went after Mahi, I kicked the wall a couple times, releasing the fury I was going to on Mahi.

23. Varun

Wednesday, 22nd November

I knew about Mahi's mother, and how strict she was. So it was strongly likely that Mahi met with the Matchmaker in the center itself, on the pretext of self-studying. She often did stay for it, and judging by her academic performance, I didn't think she really did anything of that sort. So, after the class ended, I kept a close watch on her.

She exited the building into the compound, almost fooling me of her intentions. But she had gone only to wait and chatter with her friends till they left. Soon, she turned around and re-entered the center. I casually walked around, trying not to appear suspicious, and spied as much as possible on her. Whenever she took a turn, I immediately crept up to the point to keep further surveillance. Finally, she entered a lone classroom at the corner, which anyone hardly used.

I was hesitant at first to step closer, but finally slithered slowly to the doorway. I didn't dare to peek around, because the Matchmaker was exceptionally smart. I simply focused on the sounds. Mahi's voice was faintly audible, signifying that she was talking with another person. With only another day remaining of the deadline, I was 100% sure that she was having the appointment with MM.

I slowly slipped out my mobile, and made sure that the flash and shutter sound was off as I opened the camera. This was a very difficult task, for any of the slightest mistake and the Matchmaker might have caught me. At first, I switched on the timer, and slid my mobile on the floor towards the doorway, trying to keep as much part of it as possible behind the wall. When I took it back and gazed at the picture, it was totally ambiguous.

Only the bottom of the desks was visible. I tried repeating the same technique from different points, but the pictures were always unclear. So finally, I turned it to the burst mode, and moved the mobile all across the height of the doorway, as far as my hand could go. In those 50 or so shots, I finally came across a few, which showed Mahi and the Matchmaker sitting next to each other.

Mahi's mother, just like every other Indian parent, would be mad if she discovered her child hanging out with people from the opposite sex, especially alone. Then it didn't matter even if it was only for study or notes. Because as per their perception, all the things that teenagers could do with opposite gender teens was to make out. Especially since she had learnt of Mahi's previous affair in 10th grade.

I immediately rushed out of the center, and took the first bus that led me to my home. Once I reached, I grabbed Meena's mobile, and sent the photo to Mahi's mother's number. It wasn't much difficult to obtain after giving Nimish bhaiya a burger, but his attitude said that it was probably the last time he would help me.

After sending the photo, I instantly blocked the number in order to avoid any confrontations. The next morning, I was already doubting whether my game had worked out. Mahi had taken her seat as usual, giving me the regular gazes she usually did. We hadn't been sitting together since the strict guidelines after Amyra's incident. Nothing seemed different. But in the recess, she came across me abruptly in the hallway, almost causing me to jump.

"What did you do?!" she whispered, half panicked, half furious, "I know it was you who sent the photo!"

I had the strong desire to grab her by the throat there and then, and punch her to death as I thrashed her around. But the scene was too crowded for any of that.

"I warned you, and you didn't listen," I uttered.

"Are you really going to let me die? Is that how low you can get?"

"It was you who got to the lowest point possible when you wished the Matchmaker for me."

"I will do anything to make it up for you, but just please, for God's sake, stop doing this!" she begged with teary eyes.

"The only thing you can do is to stop meeting him," I replied, walking away to avoid further conversation.

The day was also a deadline for me as we had had our last appointment on the same day. I bunked the second lecture claiming that I was sick. I genuinely acted as if I had nausea and stomach ache, and even my mother was convinced when the staff contacted her. I immediately used the time I had bought to meet with the Matchmaker before it was too late.

It was at the usual spot, and I still clearly remembered the sight of the day when Kartikeya was probably beaten to death. The Matchmaker stood at the very position where Kartik had stood. His coin was annoying me but it was useless to complain about it. It then suddenly occurred to me about how stupid I had been.

Mahi could have reported the incident to him, and then it was game over. I could predict even the winner of the ICC World Cup, but not the Matchmaker's mind. He might decide to punish me, or might as well just shrug it off, claiming that it was none of his concern. My breath was speeding up despite my attempts to control it. The scary being was staring at my gravely.

"Why there, you look so tense. Calm yourself down; I need you sane for my questionnaires," he addressed, clutching his coin and revealing his notepad.

"Yeah," I let a sigh of temporary relief.

"What is the most traumatic event that you underwent in your childhood?" he asked, staring at his notepad.

I took a moment to recollect, "I... there was this once that I had pushed Meena off into the deeper section of the pool, and I thought that she would eventually swim herself out of it. I didn't even realize how long it had been when the instructor finally pulled her out. When he scolded me that she was almost about to drown, I realized my actions and it hit me like a big hard wall of concrete."

The Matchmaker hummed arrogantly.

"Did you want to watch your sister drown?"

"What! No, of course not! We were just having fun, and I was younger and dumber."

"No one is ever that dumb. You were definitely having fun, but at some point, your subject of interest seemed to deviate. Why didn't you break out in a sweat about your sister's circumstance, since she must have been even younger at that time?"

"I don't know... I was just... an idiot."

The Matchmaker sniggered, and resumed, "If you had an option, who would you like to resurrect and watch die again? Aruna, SK or Kartikeya."

The question sent chills down my spine.

"What... What kind of question is that?"

He didn't seem to hear me, "A pompous slut, an indecisive dimwit or an anomalous gay?"

"I, I can't answer that! That is just..."

"That is not an option. Just pick one of the three. Pompous slut Aruna, Indecisive dimwit SK or anomalous gay Kartikeya?"

"I cannot choose like that..."

"I said, pick one of the three," the Matchmaker stated in a low but firm voice.

I took a deep breath, and blabbered, "All three of them."

I didn't know why I said that.

"Whose death did you like the most?"

There seemed no escape from his questions.

"I... Maybe, Kartikeya."

"Why?"

Hiding from him was useless, and I didn't wish to be caught lying.

"Because... the way... those guys were so angry and strong. Thinking how bad they must've bet him, fascinates me. The way those guys emptied their anger, while Kartik must've laid there helplessly, struggling and writhing."

"If given the chance for you to act the same, who would you do it to?"

"Mahi Chandra," automatically came out of my mouth.

Abruptly, MM burst into a hearty laugh. He leaned towards me to whisper.

"Mind is a truly hilarious place. You might just overflow it with joy, success, pleasure, pride, enthusiasm or love. But it will never rest until the anger in it is satisfied."

xxxxxxx

All the while going to the class, I was fantasizing about my plan and its effects, and my eventual revenge and freedom. Once Mahi was dead, I and Sanika would be left alone in our own perfect world. In AIIMS Rajkot. Perhaps later on even working in the same hospital. And no one would ever come in between us.

But when I entered the class, things took a turn. Soon enough, Nischay was informing me about being called by a woman out in the corridor. Curious, I followed his words and discovered Mahi and a woman standing beside her whom I assumed to be her mother. She beckoned me to join them in a corner.

"Are you Varun?" the woman asked, in a rather calm voice.

I had been a genuine moron for not thinking this out. Of course, her mother would be bothered by the fact of an unknown number taking and forwarding photos of her daughter like that. And Mahi wasn't a mute animal to not defend and convince her own mother to her side. The rage and thrill of the work had made me act impulsively without proper thinking.

But both of them appeared surprisingly calm compared to the hostile image I had in my mind. Rather, it was me, who must've been looking utterly nervous and anxious.

"Yes," I answered.

"I see... I know that it was you who took the photo and sent it to me. And I know why you did it. You both have been having a few clashes. But it doesn't mean that you go to such extents. It can seriously destroy your relationships. Aren't you friends, after all? Fights do happen between everyone, but it is important to not lose oneself in it, and remember your relations. I want you both to bury the hatchet and be back to your usual selves, and not to repeat such actions again. Okay?"

I couldn't believe my senses. The woman who was so conscious of her daughter was now suddenly okay with her being friends with a guy, especially who tried to sabotage her?

"I... I, I am sorry for my behavior. I shouldn't have done that," I quickly uttered.

I wasn't even sure what exactly had Mahi passed as the reason behind our fight. The woman simply nodded at me, appearing slightly forgiving. But mostly, she looked rather vicious behind her cheery veil.

"Now shake your hands, both of you," she demanded.

But just as we were about to do so, she interrupted yet again, "Wait! It's alright just like that. Just make sure to forget your differences and not message each other's parents out of context."

Mahi acted as if she was fine with all this, but I could feel it deep down that all this was rather a sort of a passive warning for me to stop messing with her. It just boosted my adrenaline more, making my hands tremble out of fury. After her mother left, I pretended to be amiable with her, but nevertheless, none of us tried to talk or hang out with each other.

The whole class, the events were just ringing again and again in my head, adding up to my rage every time they cycled back. I was relentless and unfocussed. I didn't even remember which lectures were taught that day. I could think of nothing else other than Mahi and her audacity to control my life.

I was quiet not just the whole class, but since a couple days, and the others must have noticed this. Because as I was leaving the center compound, Irfan approached me.

"Hey, bro, how are you? You are the one who's the most detached. Don't be like that, it would just worsen your state."

"Don't you start teaching me how to live my life," I responded.

"I... I didn't mean to do any of that. I'm just saying, that maybe you should drop by. Are you mad because of Mahi's mother? Did she say something that upset you? What exact..."

"Why the fuck are you nosy?! Don't you have your own business to attend to? Just fuck off!!" I yelled.

"Whoa, easy there! What's wrong with you? Why are you like this?"

The irritation had now exceeded the limits. I instantly slapped Irfan across the face, and continued to do so a couple times until I had him pinned by the wall and punching. But someone came by and stopped me.

"Dude!! Easy there! What's wrong?" Nischay had interjected.

"Get the fuck away, you bastard!" I yelled at him too.

"I'm not trying to piss you off, bro, I'm just mediating..." I didn't even let him complete as I kicked him in the guts and lunged onto him.

"Have you gone fucking mad!" he cried as he defended himself.

Umesh and a couple other guys came to break in, but I turned onto them too. This resulted in me being pounded by my own friends out on the footpath. The beating eventually stopped when one of the center guards nearby decided to interrupt.

"Hey! What the hell are you guys doing!! Why are you beating up your own friend?!" he exclaimed as he separated them from me.

"He's the one who is acting crazy!! He's attacking all of us for no reason!" Nischay cried.

The guard looked at me and pulled me to my feet.

"Give the guy a break. I'll talk to him. Go now," he sent them away.

"Why the fuck are you assaulting your own group, huh?" he turned to me, "Hadn't you made a scene just a few days ago? Glad this happened outside the premises, otherwise you would have been removed for sure. This much anger is not always good, boy. You come from a good, civilized household. Such an attitude doesn't suit you and won't help you in your life. Listen to me and..."

"My life has come to such a time that this is exactly the kind of attitude that I need to survive!! Leave me alone!" I jerked the hand he had on my shoulder aside and paced away in anger.

xxxxxxx

I had tried to unleash out my anger at the gym, but it just led to me doing the exercises improperly and receiving scowls from the trainers. When I had returned home, I discovered a message request on Instagram. At first, I tried to inspect the profile of the sender. It was a girl, Akriti, probably older than me, and her bio told that she studied at AIIMS Rajkot. I guessed her to be Sanika's friend.

Her message said, "Varun, what the fuck are you doing? Do you know how Sanika has been?"

I texted her back, enquiring more about the issue.

"All day, she is only thinking about you, and how you left her for another girl. She isn't concentrating on her studies, and rarely attends lectures. She has even reduced hanging out with all her friends, and she simply stays in her room depressed. Why did you have to behave like this? What is it that she lacks, huh? Weren't you childhood friends? Then why did you have to ditch her like that?"

"I haven't ditched her!! I loved, love, and will always love her!!"

"Then why did you have to go after that other girl? I very well know guys like you!! You think you can just play with girls like you want, without any consideration of their feelings. If all those years

of friendship with Sanika does really mean something to you, you should clear this mess up if you don't want her condition to deteriorate. I don't know what else will make her well. For fuck's sake, just once try keeping someone else's feelings first before your own!!"

"I will make everything right. I will. Take care of her and tell her that I love her."

I placed the mobile down, and laid on my bed, staring at the ceiling. I had to fix everything up, and free Sanika of her agony. And the only way to do it was to get rid of Mahi. She was the cause behind everything wrong that was happening in my life. She was the root of this whole tree of problems that had sprouted. She had to die. And if not by the Matchmaker, then by me.

24. Mahi

Wednesday, 22nd, November

The weird interview with the Matchmaker had ruined my already depressed mood. It had been a really stressful week, since I had learned of Kartikeya's misfortune. There had been so many deaths in the center itself that it took me a lot of willpower to visit it everyday. Thankfully, my psychiatrist would suggest techniques which proved to be really helpful. But the trauma wasn't something to be gone in a day.

Whenever I found time to slack, my mind would automatically wander to the memories I had with my friends. I would even sometimes mistake a random passerby for Aruna or SK. It wasn't like I was all alone now that they were gone. There still were other friends. Vrushali and Kshitija always kept me company, but still, best friends were best friends.

They were those whom you could share things you'd never tell anyone. They were the ones who you did every single adventure with. They were those who were always around when no one else was. They were the ones who you snubbed off everyday just to cry to see them the next day. The difference was that now I would cry on forever.

"Dhayari Phata!!" the conductor shouted.

It was then I realized that I had missed my stop. I hurriedly got off and had to walk all the way to my home. By the time I reached, I was panting like a horse. After I had freshened up, I found my mother glaring at me with a silent scowl. Sometimes I wished she didn't have to work from home so that I could get at least some break after the tedious lectures that I hardly understood anymore.

"What is this?" she asked, displaying her mobile screen to me.

I squinted my eyes to focus, and the sight threw the fuck out of me all the way to Mars. That was a photo of me and the Matchmaker, sitting in the classroom alone sometime ago. And as far as I could remember, my mom slapped me the last time she learnt of my boyfriend, and almost starved me when she once saw the chats with Varun that I had forgotten to delete.

"That... is just.... studying," I mumbled.

"Studying? But why do you need to do that with another human being? Isn't that something to do by oneself?"

"He was just helping me with my doubts."

"Haven't you got any of your girl friends for that?!"

"They all died!!" I yelled, water filling up my orbits.

"Then can't you make new ones!! How many times should I tell you to stay away from boys!"

"It was not as if we were kissing!!"

"You definitely would one day if you didn't stop this!! Have you already forgotten the last time you were 'just friends' with that guy? You would have definitely failed 10th grade had not Kavya reported it to me. Don't you still understand how important these years are for you?"

"That was exactly what I was trying to get better at!! Should I always check gender for that too!"

"I can never trust you. I want you to stop all this now onwards and consult other girls. Or, what the hell is the faculty there for? You don't have any need to hang around boys like that. Teachers will explain to you better."

"I can't," I whimpered, fearing my fate if I did otherwise.

"What do you mean by 'can't'?!" her tone rose.

"I just can't!! If I stop meeting him... I'll suffer a great loss!!"

"What fucking 'great thing' you have got to lose, huh?! I can already sense it... these are the signs that you are up to something. I am warning you, or else, I will even change your classes."

Kavya had also slinked in, attracted and worried by the ferocious quarrel.

"Why can't you understand mom?! I will die!!"

She pulled me by the collar and gave me the most horrifying frown.

"What, is, wrong with you? Have you already attached yourselves to that boy so much?"

"It is nothing like that, mom!! I will literally be dead if I stop to meet him!"

"Why?! Is he fucking going to kill you?!"

"Yes!! Aruna and SK also made the same mistake! And look where it got them!! If I stop meeting him, mom, he'll kill me too. He's... he's very dangerous," I had already begun sobbing.

She suddenly left her grip, and let out a loud sigh.

"No, no... not all this. I'm already struggling here making ends meet, and I can't deal with you acting like this too. I don't know what my fault was to deserve a fate like this. That's it, we'll go to the psychiatrist right now."

"I'm not crazy, mom!! It is all true!!"

Then unexpectedly, she began to weep too, "I just want both of my daughters to study hard so that they will be strong and independent women when they grow up. Why don't you understand that? This all adolescent fun and enjoyment is just going to ruin your fucking life. I don't want you to be struggling around just like me. But these events have totally worsened it for you. We need to sort this out before it's too late. Get ready, we are leaving."

Seeing my mother's condition, I didn't retaliate and simply began obeying her. Soon enough, her scooter stopped near the clinic. The receptionist mentioned something about making an appointment in prior, but my mother insisted about the urgency. Nevertheless, we didn't have to wait for long.

We entered the room, as if walking through a portal into someone's home. The room itself calmed me down a bit, while Dr. Chaurasiya stared at us grinning.

"Hello there, Mahi. What's up?" she greeted.

My mom instantly narrated the whole incident to her, expectantly looking at her to do something that would magically cure me. But the doctor seemed to sense my inner thoughts.

"Would you mind if I had a little chat with her in privacy?" she asked my mom in the most polite voice I had ever heard.

She hesitated for a moment, but after the doctor assured her, she left.

"So... care to explain about your beliefs? Why do you think you'd die?"

I knew that there was no use of crying out the truth. Being in the condition I was, it was only going to make me sound as a genuine lunatic.

"I... it was actually that, I was so preoccupied with all this happening, that the incident totally... blew me off. I didn't know what I was talking... I just panicked and broke apart."

"But still, why did such a thought occur to you? Has there been any connection?"

"No, no... As I said, I just blabbered whatever I felt. I was tired of my mother always rebuking me about being around boys, and didn't want to face another of her fury."

Dr. Chaurasiya hummed in a response, grabbing her pen and scribbling something on her notepad. She reminded me exactly of the Matchmaker.

"You know, I get it. Back in my days, I used to study at an all girls convent school. We were always taught to stay away from boys and stick to our stereotypical duties and behavior. But still, we would sneak after school and join the boys gang from the nearby boys convent. They would always be doing something stirring.

Many of my friends also dated a few. We would go to great lengths to ensure our parents didn't realize this. But there was this one time, when I had merely chanced upon one of the boys on the street. My father spotted us conversing, and scolded us really bad, even calling the boy's parents and all. I felt like I had done some heinous crime."

"So you do agree with my plight?" I asked.

She nodded subtly, "But if I say this to your mother, she'll probably sue me for manipulating you. You see, our society is a lot conservative, and any change to occur is gradual but not impossible. You can't always expect to control everything around you, so you have to simply adapt, just like mammals did and survived extinction.

Plus, your mother single-handedly manages everything in your household, so you must be realizing how much pressure she has on herself. The only thing that matters to her in this world is to see her daughters become successful in life. There is no use fighting and blaming her. You should understand her point of view too.

The most effective solution for this is to just not get caught. Talk to whoever you want, might as well have a fling or two, but under the radar. There is still time for such interactions to be normal in our society. But better you also keep in mind your aim in life. Don't let it distract you off your studies. Anything is good as long as it is within its limits."

After some continued discussion on my traumas and overall mental health and progression, the doctor proceeded to call back my mom. She was less gloomy than earlier. Dr. Chaurasiya began assuring her that nothing was serious, and she needn't worry and overreact.

"Coming across boys is absolutely common for her. You can't always prohibit her from that. There will always be boys wherever she goes. So, at one moment or the other, she is bound to talk and require assistance from them. At least she isn't dating or hooking up. I know Mahi, she's quite a clever girl.

So as far as the interaction is trivial, I recommend you to not interfere. Mahi does have a good sense about it, and I've enlightened her more as well. She has learnt a lot from her previous mistake. What you need is to trust her a little. You can't always control the way someone behaves or thinks. You need to believe in her. It is completely common for boys and girls to be friends with each other nowadays, so there is no reason to worry.

And it is just as important for her to keep her social skills well. Else, she might suffer from lack of them in later periods of her life. If you deal with her harshly, it might rather impact her negatively, as it would just lead to frustration and dislike pile in her towards you as it did today. Discuss whatever issues there may be with each other calmly, and I guarantee you that it'd work better."

My mother was silently staring at the desk, probably contemplating.

"You're right. I... I overreacted on the incident unnecessarily. Mahi, beta, I'm sorry for yelling at you," she said, pulling me into an embrace.

"Just... keep it to being friends," she concluded.

Before leaving, the doctor checked with my prescriptions and therapies and gave some further suggestions.

xxxxxxx

The remaining day, mother was rather quiet, still trying to wrap her things around. She also seemed somewhat tense of her work. I decided not to trouble her any longer and tried to study. If only the Matchmaker could help me in my studies in reality. I wondered if he could make someone love science.

The next morning I went to the class as usual, with my mom once again mentioning it to me that I was permitted to ask for help in study from boys and wait after class if it really helped me. This uplifted my mood a bit. But there was still a bigger problem waiting for me, namely, Varun. I knew he was behind all this, and I knew he wasn't going to stop soon.

After some altercation with him that day, he looked like he had sworn some oath to have me dealt with. Frankly speaking, I was scared of him. He had tried to assault me the last time, so I couldn't say to what extent he could go. The boy that I madly fell for was now nowhere to be seen.

When I returned home, my mother wasn't yet content. She handed me her phone, her face puzzled.

"Do you recognize that number who sent me the photo? Either way, it is very inappropriate for someone to invade your privacy and contact me like that. We need to set things right," she sternly stated.

I didn't know the number but I knew the perpetrator.

"Umm... it's actually a friend."

"Friend? This doesn't seem a very friendly thing to do."

"He had been mad since we had this fight... uh... I refused to help with the previous practical at the college because I was myself struggling with mine. He mistook it as a gesture of contempt."

"This is such a trifle! What was the need of doing all this? I need to talk to him tomorrow... tell me his name."

"No, mom!! You don't have to! I'll deal with it, it's just a friendship fight."

"But this has escalated up to me, which is not acceptable. Don't worry, I won't do anything to mess your relationships up. What is his name, tell me?"

I stopped retorting, because somewhere, I believed her to silence Varun up.

"Varun."

"That boy you chat with?"

I nodded. So she did accompany me to the center the following day, and dealt with Varun in a totally unpredictable way. She always had been strict and loud towards me, that I totally didn't see such a calm approach of her coming. Varun looked really nervous, which I enjoyed a little. The whole day we didn't have any further interactions.

But the next day in college, when we were having our physics practical of resonance tube, Varun exchanged positions with the guy next to me. I thought that he was about to taunt me again, but it turned out to be exactly opposite.

"Hey, I'm sorry," he whispered.

I didn't react and continued to gaze at the other kids trying to get the right length for the tuning fork to be audible.

"I know I have been a dick. I was totally screwed after seeing all those events. And upon learning that I was one of the targets themselves, I just lost it. You know, I had been in love with Sanika since all of my childhood. She soon found out about us and has been pushing me away till this date. But still, this reason wasn't enough for me to take such steps. I'm really sorry."

My anger and hatred soon transformed into pity. It definitely would've been too painful to make such a discovery. It really had been my fault to a degree. Maybe if I had been in his place, I'd have acted the same. It was a feat that he was apologizing for it.

"It's... okay, Varun. I'm sorry too, for acting selfishly. I never imagined for all this to go horribly wrong. I only wanted both of us to be happy."

"Let's both forget our pasts and turn over a new leaf. What do you say, pals again?" he put forth his hand.

I smiled at him and shook it. So there began our friendship again. But it was limited to only that. None of us mentioned anything about dating. Our friendship was too fragile to bring it up now. We soon enough returned to our previous times, when we also began sitting next to each other, since the center had been a little clement. I started to feel a little less lonely by getting one of my best friends back. My trauma and anxiety had started to lose their influence.

It must've been a few days since. Varun had been absent from class that day, so I had texted to enquire. But when I reached home, he messaged me asking to call him urgently. When he picked up, his tone was really miserable.

"Mahi..." he groaned.

"Varun? What is it? Are you okay?"

"I'm cold, Mahi. It is awfully cold up here."

"Where are you?"

"You remember the new building that was being built in my society but whose construction was stuck due to some legal issues? I'm on its rooftop."

"Why the hell are you there?"

"I don't know. My feet just led me here. You have been a really good friend Mahi. You have always supported me when no one has. I'm once again sorry for all the wrong I ever did to you."

"Why are you saying all this... Varun? What is going on?!"

"I'm just ruminating over how my life went all wrong. It was my greed that I didn't accept you and went to the Matchmaker to chase Sanika. Since then, there have been these thoughts and emotions racing in my mind that I can't control. I can't even tell which one of them belong to me and which ones are probably induced by the Matchmaker.

It is painful to live like this Mahi. To know that you'll always be under control, and under the fear of carefully adjusting out time to see him or die. I can't live like this Mahi. This wasn't the life that I wished for. I can't. I hope to meet you again in the next life."

"What nonsense are you spewing, Varun!! Stop all this!! There hasn't bee..." the call ended.

I tried redialing, but the mobile was switched off.

25. Mahi

Wednesday, 29th, November

I was panicking. I didn't know what to do. It seemed a lot like a suicide message. I thought about contacting his parents or the police for help, but I feared it to be not enough. This was a very critical condition, in which his mentality and emotions were too fragile.

Wasting no time, I got up from the bed.

"Hey, everything okay? Where are you going?" Kavya asked, who was sitting across all this time.

"I... I need to go. Please cover for me," I said, and left.

Without caring about my mother, I just dashed out of the apartment. Hastily, I counted the cash I had as I hailed an autorickshaw. I tried to appear less frantic, and it seemed to be working seeing the driver's casual talkative behavior.

"Ah, this traffic..." he groaned, as we came across a heavily crowded road.

"Take the other road, it's a short cut, quick!" I pointed.

"What? No, it's actually longer. We'll reach the destination at probably the same time. Instead, driving longer would simply burn more fuel and cost you m..."

"Please, just take the other route," I insisted.

The driver sighed, "Okay, as you wish. Customer is God."

He turned the rickshaw around and sped into the freer road. I constantly checked at the time and repeatedly tried to contact Varun to no avail.

"You know, there is no such thing such as shortcuts in life. There are only two kinds of routes. Ones that lead us to our goal, and the others, the dead ends," he blabbered to which I absentmindedly nodded.

As the rickshaw came to a halt, he turned to check the meter.

"See, it took us around 10 minutes, just as same. But your fare is 10₹ costl..."

I didn't listen to anymore of his gibberish, and stuffed the fare into his hands. I swiftly hurried to the gate of Varun's society, which I had seen only once from a distance when he had taken me out for pasta nearby.

At the gate, the watchman stopped me for the register entry.

"Varun Banerjee, I'm his friend, Mahi Chandra..."

"Oh, okay miss. You can go, I'll fill in the other details," the watchman interrupted.

I didn't know since when watchmen had become this generous, and whether even this was appropriate, but I had greater things to worry about. I remembered our call, and searched for the under-construction building.

There it lay, behind a few wings, tall and shabby. I supposed it was planned to be even better than the other ones, but whatever that caused its hiatus had made it look crooked. Some kind of makeshift fencing around it seemed to keep off people.

I went over it, and crept inside. It was a lot darker and quiet. Only my footsteps and some sounds that I assumed to be of the wind echoed. I leaned near the stairwell, and was shocked to see the roof almost 10 storeys high. And of course there wasn't any elevator.

But keeping in mind the incoming threat, I took a deep breath and started sprinting upwards. I usually would've tired out at the 5th floor, but for some reason, I wasn't tired as much even as I neared the roof. Maybe it was the adrenaline rush.

As soon as I entered the terrace, the light returned all of a sudden more than it ever was inside. I looked around for Varun, fearing that he had already done something, before spotting him near the parapet at one side.

"Varun!!" I cried, running towards him.

He turned around, but didn't seem as surprised as I had expected him to be. He was rather totally filled with sorrow and desperation. He took some steps towards me, leading us into an embrace.

"Varun, what the fuck is up with you?! You better not do anything that will make both of us reg..."

But before I could complete, he stepped back. He held out my mobile, which he had seemingly snatched from my pocket.

"I don't think you'll be needing this," he stated, putting it into his own jeans.

"Varun?? What are you..."

Just then, from his other pocket, he pulled out a sharp shiny knife. Merely looking at it cut fear into my heart.

"You are so gullible, Mahi," Varun scoffed.

So, this was all a trick!? I should've known it by the way the watchman let me in; Varun must've had already told him about me coming! But he had been acting so amiably for the past few days! Was that all false?

"You have had enough time in your life messing mine up. It needs to be stopped now, once, and for all," he further added.

"Varun!! What the hell are you saying? I thought we were past all this?!"

"Past this, my ass!! You think you can get away after ruining someone's life like that? Selfish people like you don't deserve to live, and in fact, be born in the first place!"

"Please stop it! I know it has been too much for you, but we can figure it all out!"

But Varun didn't seem in the mood for negotiations. He kept his frown solemn, and started stepping towards me slowly. I backed away with equal speed.

"I have already figured it all out. And it doesn't include you being alive!!"

As he yelled and raised his knife, I quickly grabbed a brick lying nearby, pointing it at him.

"If you come any closer, I will throw this!" I cried.

Varun hesitated for a moment, lowering his hand.

"You... Are you sure you can do it? You have the guts? You sure didn't have them to accept and repent for your mistake when it was revealed."

"What else can I do to make things right!"

"Spare me the effort of killing you by doing it yourself!!"

"I... I can't," I stuttered.

"I know. That's why I am doing you this favor."

I did notice that he was planning on lunging at me. So, as soon as he moved his feet, I flung the brick onto him. He ducked in the most difficult way possible, but nevertheless evaded the brick as it shattered behind him.

I was in no sane mind to stop and look for other defenses. In the hysteria, I resorted to simply running back down. The 10 storey ascent had already exhausted me enough. Still, I used all of my remaining energy to save my life.

I didn't even realize when I had left Varun behind. But this didn't stop or slow me down. The fear was enough to haunt me for more than even days or probably months.

By the time I reached the 5th floor, I was forced to take a halt.

"How did you get there?" I exclaimed, staring at Varun in horror who was already at the base of the stairs.

"In case you haven't noticed around, there are more than one way to descend, babe."

He suddenly leapt onto me to strike the knife, but I fell down backwards. Kicking his arm away, I made my way again upstairs.

"Help!! Help!!" I screamed loudly, my voice bouncing around.

"The only person who will hear your voice is me," Varun's voice boomed from somewhere below.

I was extremely tired now, and my heart was thumping at light speed, making it harder for me to do anything or even think properly. So, I made sure I was out of Varun's vision, and retreated further into the same floor for hiding.

I took cover behind a broad pillar, panting heavily. Keeping myself as quiet as possible, I tried to find Varun and the alternate ways that he mentioned. But none of them were visible in the dark and rubble-crowded surroundings.

My breath was again quickened as a sound from behind caught my attention. But it were just some pigeons flapping around the edges. I didn't get why they had to be fucking everywhere.

Another sound, like a kind of clanging or banging, radiated from the front. I tried to carefully peek around and look, but nothing. The same sound repeated itself, this time from the opposite side, and evident that it was approaching closer. I once again peeked, but couldn't see a thing suspicious.

Yet when I came back to my position, I felt the eerie presence of someone. I turned around just in time to catch Varun in the attempt of thrusting the knife into my belly. I held his hands tightly with all my force as the blade stopped mere inches from my body.

He tried to wiggle his grip to liberate it, but I managed to keep my hold on. This caused both of us to tumble down to the floor in the struggle. I instantly pushed Varun off, also doing the same to myself in the process. I further rolled away quickly, and tried to get to my feet.

But Varun was quicker, and grasped my ankle, causing me to stumble again. He tried to secure his grip and drag me towards him as I writhed.

"Just give in, already! You're just a fucking weak girl!! You are no match for someone like me!!" he shouted.

Upon learning that my feet were in his control and useless, I tried to make use of my hands. I attempted to reach various things around, but they were always too far away or difficult to grab quickly while being dragged. All that I could feel coming in between my fists was dirt.

And that was it when the bulb inside my head suddenly lit. I gathered all the dirt possible into my palms. Just as Varun was about to stab me, I flung it right onto his face, specifically in his eyes. He let out a cry, his knife dropping and grip on my ankle loosening.

This time, I got to my feet successfully, and staggered away. But knowing that running away was probably going to be harder, I picked up a metallic rod lying around. I pointed it aggressively at Varun, who was glaring at me with the most vicious look I had ever seen. Even scarier than my mother.

"Keep, it, aside," he commanded in a completely stern voice.

As he began gradually taking steps, my feet also moved along a back automatically. Still, I swung the rod around, aiming to hit Varun. But he was shrewd too, and kept avoiding it.

At one point, I decided to beat him on the top of his head. But he was stronger than I expected, and after catching the rod midair, jerked it out of my grip. He threw it aside, continuing his way towards me. I turned around to find a way, but discovered that I had arrived at an edge.

It made Varun possible to corner me, and he soon proceeded to pin me to a nearby pillar by the neck.

"Don't worry, neither would I choke you nor throw you off. It'd seem too painless for what all you have done to me," he uttered.

Then, looking around, he picked up a pointy fragment of a tile. Before I could even comprehend, he stabbed it right into my left arm. I let out a loud shriek when I felt the huge amount of pain sting all through my body. The fragment stayed inside, constantly making my wound throb. But at least, it stopped a lot of blood from flowing out.

"Please stop... It Varun!! Did you forget it all? Everything that we had? Every moment that... We spent together? Is what I did so wrong to make all that erase and kill me?!" I sobbed.

Varun seemed a little reluctant for his further actions.

"Do you really want to do this? Do you really want... To be a killer? Do you truly believe that killing me will solve everything?"

"I... I don't know whether killing you would. But letting you stay alive will definitely complicate it more."

"You'll go to jail for this!! The cops will detain you, even hit you maybe. No one will look at you in the same way. No one will talk... To you, just avoid you. Even your own parents will think twice about interacting with you."

"Shut your fucking mouth up..." he tried to fight but I could see his spirit faltering.

"And what about Sanika? Do you think she'll love a... Murderer? Won't she be scared of you either? Do you want her to be scared of you? Do you want to be separated... From her forever?"

Varun suddenly left my grip and let out a loud, shrill scream of frustration that surged all across the building.

"What the fuck is wrong with my life!! I lose Sanika if I don't do anything, and I lose her even if I do something!! This is not fair!! God, this is, not fair!! Matchmaker, this is not fair, you fucking bastard!!"

The shard still throbbed in my arm, but I dared not touch it. I tried to slowly slither away while Varun was distracted, but the pain was just adding fuel to the fire.

"This is just... This is just fucking insane. This, is, madness..." Varun kept on repeating.

Suddenly, he noticed me again, and the terror came gushing back into me. But just then, a reassuring sound filled the environment. It was the ringing of sirens of police jeeps.

"No, no, no!!" Varun cried as he gazed down the edge, "They are here, and they won't leave me!! They will throw me into prison, and my life will be permanently ruined!! Sanika will never love me again!! I can't... I... I can't, I shouldn't. I don't want to do this anymore. I just... want an escape. I need to get away from all this. I need..."

But I didn't have it in me to protest. I watched as Varun went closer to the end of the edge, and looked downwards. Then, in an instant, he was gone. He had leapt off. I didn't even know how to react. I simply dropped down, huddling between my knees, tears streaming out.

After a second, there was a loud thud on some kind of vehicle, and judging by the sound of the sirens, Varun had fallen onto one of the very police jeeps. I sobbed uncontrollably, unsure of what to do.

Just then, my ears fell onto the weird vibration that was echoing around. I soon recognized the message notification as my own, and traced the source. At some distance lay my mobile, with its screen lit from messages popping. I had no idea why I found myself having the time to check it, but I was so bewildered that I didn't know anything anymore.

I picked it up, which must've been dropped by Varun in the scuffle. When I read the messenger, I was shocked.

"We have met with the criteria of our contract termination, which were, demise of the target or progression of the target in a paralyzed or vegetative state. So, you don't have to take the trouble to meet me regularly anymore for the 60 minutes. This is where we part our ways."

I threw the mobile away in fear, and lied on the floor, as I felt footsteps climbing up.

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It must've had been a while since then. I didn't exactly remember how long, maybe months. To be frank, I didn't remember anything clearly since then. Only that the police found me and I was in a completely hysterical state.

Dr. Chaurasiya had said that my mental health had worsened a lot much from the traumas, and had suggested that I get admitted for effective treatments. So here I was, trapped in this asylum, or whatever it was called.

I barely remembered and understood what all had been going around. I had heard the nurses say that I had something called psychosis, and had recurrent panic attacks, nightmares and a generalized state of anxiety and paranoia, along with severe PTSD.

Suddenly, the room's door flung open, and in walked the nurses. But instead of a normal routine of medicines and check-ups, they said something else.

"Your family is here to meet. Come on."

They talked something about putting restraints on me, but one of them disagreed, deeming me harmless. They escorted me to some room, and seated me on a chair. In the front was an iron barrier grid. And on its opposite side was a familiar face.

"Hey, Mahi! How have you been since the last time we met?" Kavya greeted.

I strangely didn't exactly remember the last time we met.

"I... Have been fine," I managed to speak.

"Good. Be taking your medicines on time. The doctor has said that you are improving, and you might be discharged at the end of this year. Actually, mom is outside talking just those things with her."

"Nice..."

Actually, I did remember some fact now. On the day of the horrible incident, it was actually her who led the police to arrive. As she was sitting right across me, she had listened to my talk and raised an alarm to my mother regarding my concern, who further on contacted the police.

"So, you want to hear some interesting things happening in my life?"

I gave her a nod.

"Okay, so actually, there's this guy, who's in the same class as me. And he has this curly hair and perfect jawline and body, just enough to make me flat."

"Crush?"

"Yeah, yeah. He's my crush. I tried to get to talk with him a couple times, but it's just difficult. He's one of those chad boys, who think talking to girls is useless."

"That's bad."

"Yeah. But don't worry. You know, there's this one guy that has promised to help me in this matter. He has some really crazy abilities, and I bet that he's the one to get my job done."

"Who is it?"

"I don't actually quite remember his name... What was it again... Something like Mithun Martand."

Just as the realization hit me, I wanted to scream and tell her to stay away from him. But instead, all that came out of me was a crazy fit of paranoia as I convulsed and yelled. The nurses caught me strongly by the limbs and carried me back as Kavya stared at me in horror and worry.

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