



Yours Unexpectedly

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Category: Sport

Description: ANYA MEHRA

For years, I've been the girl who follows the rules—a perfect student, a good daughter, and the one who dreams of making her father proud. All I've ever wanted is for him to see me, to take my ideas seriously, and to believe I'm just as capable as my brother.

It's everything I thought I needed. Until him.

Daniel Grayson is the university's basketball captain, and he's the last person I expected to change my carefully laid plans. He's confident, determined, and so frustratingly charming that staying indifferent feels impossible.

They say you can't control every part of life, but I never expected my heart to go against my rules.

DANIEL GRAYSON

Basketball has always been my life. My passion, my dream, and my escape. But my dad doesn't see it that way. To him, it's just a phase, a distraction from the family business he wants me to take over.

It's everything I thought I'd ever fight for. Until her.

Anyah Mehra is brilliant, focused, and so out of my league that I should've known better. Yet, the more time I spend with her, the more I realize she's what I've been missing. She's the one who makes me want to be more—on and off the court.

And now that I've found her, I don't plan on letting her go.

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ANYA

“Ma, I swear to God, I’ve been eating enough.” I sigh, rolling my eyes as I hold the phone to my ear. It’s been six months since I moved away, and they still worry about me so much. Although I’m very grateful to have such loving parents, it can get annoying sometimes.

“You don’t have to worry about her eating habits at all, Ma,” my brother shouts from the living room. “You know she’s a foodie,” he adds and I can almost see him scowl.

I scoff. “I’m fine. I swear, Ma. Papa, why are you silent? Please help me out here,” I plead, looking at his familiar amused smile.

He chuckles through the screen. “Have I ever won against her? Call your brother; he’s the only one she listens to,” Papa says coolly. I sigh.

“Ma, I’m really late. I’ll call you back tonight, okay?” I say gently. She nods and I can see the sadness on her face, but before I start to feel guilty, I end the call .

It’s my fault. I’ve been idling throughout winter break, so I woke up late. God knows why I thought it’d be a good idea to wash my hair because it takes me forever to dry it so I can look like a decent human being.

I wasted my winter break sleeping and binge-watching crime thrillers. Well, besides my internship, which only involved making coffee and picking up people’s trash here and there. Oh, and on New Year’s, I socialized—just for the day.

The first semester was hectic, and I'm still adjusting to this atmosphere. Having Arnav here is such a blessing. I can't believe I'm saying that, but he isn't as annoying as I thought he would be and it is a little too helpful, which is so out of character for him. I also have Siya with me; she makes university life so much more bearable.

"Stop daydreaming and get ready!" Arnav yells, snapping me out of my thoughts. "I'll drop you off. You're already late," he says and I nod even though he can't see me. I jump into action immediately.

"Do you need help?" Siya appears in the doorway of my room, her head tilted as she takes in the mess I've created while getting ready.

"Yes, please," I whine, grateful for her timing. She chuckles, taking the blow dryer from my hand. Long hair problems. It takes me forever to dry it, so I'm grateful that she's helping. I quickly change into my college attire, pairing a long-sleeved black sweater with light-wash jeans. I add a black puffer jacket and a black scarf to wrap snugly around my neck.

It's not my fault. Being from India, I grew up in a warm climate, and now I'm excited to face snow. I mean, yes, Delhi gets very cold, too. But it never snows there, so to say the cold is killing me here would be an understatement. But despite the freezing temperatures, I won't lie, I love every moment of it.

"Arnav is waiting for us in the car," Siya says. "Give me a moment. I'll go grab my bag." She adds and runs off to her room. "Are you excited?" Siya asks as we head to the elevator a few minutes later.

I scoff. "I mean, it's alright. It's just a new semester. I'm sure by the end of this one, I'll be a crying mess." I push away the memories of endless all-nighters, caffeine-fueled breakdowns, and the crushing weight of deadlines from last semester. She laughs softly.

“What about you?” I ask.

“I’m nervous.” She fiddles with her fingers.

“I’m just a call away. Always remember that,” I say gently, taking her hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze. She gives me a grateful smile. I love this woman so much. After all she’s been through, to come this far is just so brave. I smile back, adoring my best friend. The pressure of making connections with people who seem to glide through life so effortlessly, always scares her.

The elevator pings and we jog towards the car. Arnav looks pissed, his fingers drumming against the steering wheel. He has been grumpy for as long as I can remember. Ugh, now he’s going to chew my ear off. I can hear my mother’s voice saying, “ He already doesn’t speak much, Anya.” I take a seat in the passenger side while Siya sits in the back.

“Oh, so you’re finally done?” he taunts as he starts the engine. I roll my eyes. Typical Arnav.

“I apologize, brother, for the inconvenience I’ve caused. But no one asked for your generous offer. We could have managed our way to university.” I flash him a fake smile.

Arnav rolls his eyes at my comment. “We both know you have the navigational skills of a drunken goldfish. You’d be lost within minutes,” he retorts grumpily.

“I had Siya with me. We could have managed. And I’ve been going on my own for the last six months. Just admit it, bro, you care about me.” I narrow my eyes at him.

“That’s—” Arnav begins, but Siya interrupts us before he can snap out a snarky remark.

“I am very nervous, guys. Can you two please be civil for once in your lives?” she pleads.

Arnav huffs at Siya’s words, but the tension softens. The car grows silent for a moment. I notice him observing Siya through the rearview mirror.

“Siya, you’ve got nothing to worry about.” He tries to reassure her. He is a man of few words and you will hardly ever notice him making a conversation. It’s not because he is an introvert, it’s because he doesn’t like people, which I think applies to me, too, in some ways. I just don’t show it openly, and I am definitely not grumpy. But one thing I know is that he treats Siya like his own sister. He cares for her as much as he does for me, and he will definitely throw punches if someone ever makes her cry. So will I. “You are amazing, Siya. Remember last sem? You handled it like a pro. Everything will be fine,” he adds.

“For once in his life, he is right. Siya, you’re bomb, baby. Take a deep breath and rock the world.” I smile.

Arnav pulls up in the parking lot and says, “Here, I bought you guys coffee.” He pulls two coffee cups from the cup holders, handing them to us.

“Thank you.” Both Siya and I speak simultaneously. We get out of the car. I link my arm with hers and wave to Arnav.

As we walk towards the main building, I glance around, taking in the familiar surroundings. The campus looks the same as ever, filled with crowds of students rushing to their classes, athletes jogging and exercising, and couples walking hand-in-hand.

I take a sip of my iced coffee. “I’ll never understand why you drink cold coffee in winter,” Siya says, shaking her head.

I chuckle. “Hey, it’s my guilty pleasure. Besides, it’s the perfect combination of bitter and sugary,” I reply. “My day feels incomplete if I don’t have cold coffee in the mornings. It makes me grumpy.”

I see a tall guy jogging towards me. His pace is fast and he looks lost in his world. Before I can get out of his way, he collides with me and the coffee cup slips out of my hand, spilling the chilled beverage on both of us.

Siya gasps. “Oh God. Are you alright, Anya?” she asks, reaching out for me, concern flashing in her brown eyes.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going.” I huff, annoyance creeping down my spine.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t looking at—” He pauses, gaze traveling slowly up my face. When his eyes finally meet mine, a flash of surprise crosses his expression as if he’s only just become aware of our surroundings. He towers over me, broad shoulders casting a long shadow. Angular, sharp features define his face with a tousled mess of chestnut brown hair that falls over his forehead. His piercing emerald-green eyes are intense and vibrant while a strong jawline and a hint of stubble lend him a rugged, untamed air.

I catch myself staring and feel a wave of embarrassment for getting distracted. “Seriously, watch where you’re jogging next time,” I say, trying to keep my composure despite the coffee dripping down my front.

Amusement flickers in his gaze. “I apologize,” he repeats.

“Well, your apologies are not accepted because I am going to have to spend my entire day drenched in cold coffee. And if I catch a cold, I will—” I fumble, my nose flaring in anger. It doesn’t help that this guy is dangerously handsome .

“You will what?” He chuckles, the sound making my cheeks flush. A small smile forms on his face.

My frustration rises more, realizing that he finds this situation entertaining. “I will...” I poke his rock-hard chest. “I don’t have to tell you what I will do. You just pray to God that I don’t fall sick because of you.” I fold my arms across my chest, shooting him a scathing glare.

A low laugh rumbles through him as he looks at me. The cocky bastard is enjoying my anger, which just fuels it.

I continue, trying to look as intimidating as possible despite my five-foot-six stature. “You are paying my dry cleaning bill, I don’t care.”

“Okay, okay. I promise to pay for your dry cleaning. No need to get all riled up.” A smirk touches his lips.

“Come on. We are late,” Siya says slowly. My eyes widen as I remember I have a lecture to attend. “Oh shit!” I curse and glare at him. “Now, I am late for class, too. All thanks to you.” I cough, and without giving him an opportunity to speak, we rush away. I push him slightly out of my way intentionally. I don’t usually hold grudges, but I do now. I turn around to glance at him once more, only to find him looking at me. I hold up my middle finger, and he laughs again.

What a great start to the semester!

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The class groans collectively. “I know, I know,” Professor Brown says. “I’m not asking for a submission now. It’ll be due towards the end of the semester, so you have plenty of time,” she clarifies, her composed tone doing little to ease the frustration in the room.

I sigh, slumping back in my seat. It’s only the first day and we already have an assignment. Great. Just what I needed. “You will be pairing up for this assignment,” she adds and the class sighs collectively. I resist the urge to groan louder than the rest. Group projects—my least favorite. Less freedom, too many opinions, and the endless back-and-forth just to agree on something.

“We can pair up together,” Sophie says, leaning toward me with an easy smile. Her blonde hair catches the light streaming through the window, and her blue eyes glint with amusement at my obvious displeasure. She knows me well enough to know how grumpy group assignments make me. We have known each other for almost a year now but she has managed to become so close to me, it’s a mystery how that happened, considering I am a reserved person. I nod and smile back at her. If there’s anyone I wouldn’t mind working with, it’s her. “How’s Siya?” she asks.

“She was very nervous,” I say. I couldn’t even bid her a proper farewell because of that stupid guy, and I didn’t even catch his name. Now, I will have to bear all the dry cleaning expenses myself. Arnav is going to eat my head off. Plus, I feel guilty for rushing Siya.

“I have already made the pairs. I will email you the list now. You have ten minutes to

check it out, find your partner, and sit with them. Then I will provide you with details about the assignment,” Professor Brown informs us and walks towards her laptop, her heels clicking against the floor.

I watch as she types something into the laptop, feeling reassured. The minutes tick by slowly, and finally, she clears her throat, catching everyone’s attention.

“Alright, I’ve just emailed you your partner details,” she announces. I reach for my phone, pull up my email, and scroll down the list of names.

Daniel Grayson.

Huh? My eyebrows furrow. I have never heard the name before.

“Oh my god!” Soph exclaims. “You are partnered with Daniel!” She’s buzzing with excitement.

“Who is he?” I ask, a frown settling between my brows. She gasps dramatically, making me roll my eyes, already bracing for the inevitable fan-girl moment.

“Because Judd, the previous captain, was drafted and graduated, he has been announced as the new captain of our basketball team,” she explains, her tone brimming with excitement. “In the last game, his performance was phenomenal. And more than that...” She sighs dramatically. “He’s the epitome of hotness. You don’t know him, do you?” She gives me a bored look, and I smile sheepishly.

“Not really interested in basketball. Kindly forgive me.” I raise my hands in mock surrender and smile sheepishly. Sports aren’t my cup of tea, or cup of coffee for that matter. “Who is your partner?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

“It’s Olivia Thompson. Never talked to her, but I’ve heard she’s sweet,” she says, her

tone thoughtful.

“Could you spot this Daniel person for me, please?” I pout. She chuckles, getting up and scanning the class like a detective on a mission.

“I don’t think he’s here, Anya.” She frowns. I let out an annoyed sigh. Today is really not my day.

“Great,” I mutter, leaning back in my chair. “My partner’s a no-show. This semester is off to a great start already.”

Soph sits down. “I am sure he will show up,” She reassures me. “It’s not like he can miss all the classes. I will go sit with Olivia, okay?” I nod.

“Okay, let’s begin. Please take notes if you wish to. I will be providing guidelines on your emails, but you will receive them by next week,” Professor Brown announces.

I open my notes app. I have to take all the notes because I cannot depend on my partner. He’s absent, and I will have to fill him in on all the details. Plus, I tend to forget things.

I chose this class because I want to start my own company someday, and MBA always helps entrepreneurs. It’s my dreams that keep me motivated—even when my partner is MIA. Professor Brown starts to discuss the details of the assignment, outlining the requirements and expectations for the upcoming project. I diligently take notes on my phone, already resigning myself to the fact that I might just end up doing this assignment alone.

“At the end of the report, please mention your contributions to the project. In case of any conflicts, email me,” she says. “And I see some students sitting alone.” Her gaze snags on me. “You can find your partner’s email and contact number in the email.

Please inform them about this assignment. If there's no response, come to me. ”

I quickly copy his address. Opening a new email, I paste Daniel's email address into the “To” field. My fingers tap swiftly across the keyboard as I begin to type out a message.

I go over the email once more, satisfied with its straightforward tone and proud of myself for not using any sarcasm.

I am very capable of doing this assignment on my own. I don't mind mentioning his name. I just want my grades—that's all. Secretly, I hope he's one of those athletes who hates studying. Maybe he won't reply to me at all, so I can do this project at my own pace, according to my liking; no need to discuss with anyone. The freedom is too tempting.

The rest of the class drags on, my attention wavering as I struggle to focus on Professor Brown's words, typing notes almost mechanically. “Alright, that's all for today. We'll meet on Thursday,” She wraps up the lecture. I pocket my phone, and Sophia comes and stands next to me, waiting patiently for me.

“Let's go!” I exclaim, getting up and giving her a wide grin, trying to shake off the fatigue from the long class. She smiles back. We make our way out of the classroom, the corridor bustling with students chattering and footsteps echoing in the hallway. I can't help but grumble about my missing partner. “Can you believe missing the first class itself? It doesn't really give a good impression,” I comment.

Soph chuckles lightly, trying to be positive. “Maybe something came up. Give him the benefit of the doubt.” I nod. I am not going to judge someone I haven't even met yet , I remind myself.

“How was your experience with Olivia?” I ask.

“She seems really kind. And she is also very smart,” she says.

“Good for you,” I nudge her playfully. We spot Siya walking towards us, her head down. She has her headphones on but we both know nothing’s playing in it because she likes to be extra conscious about her environment.

“Siya!” Soph exclaims, her voice too loud. I swat her arm, shooting her a warning look.

“Don’t shout. She doesn’t like public attention.” I hiss under my breath. Sophia gives me an apologetic smile.

“Hi, Soph.” Siya greets us, her eyes flicking up from the ground.

“How was your class?” I question, hoping it went better than she expected.

“It was fine. I made a friend.” She smiles shyly.

“I am so proud of you,” Sophia says.

“I told you. You will be fine, babe.” I wink, giving her a quick side hug.

“Come on. I am hungry,” Soph whines, dragging out the word and we chuckle. We begin making our way towards the campus cafe, Cafe d’ Meet . It is a cozy and inviting space with warm lighting and colorful decorations adorning the walls. Tables and chairs are scattered throughout the room, students lounging and chatting over steaming cups of coffee or plates of pastries. Siya falls into step beside me. The air is filled with the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee, warm pastries, and hints of cinnamon and vanilla from the baked goods.

My phone pings. I pull it out and see a new email notification. Curious, I open the

email app and check the new message. Seeing the sender's name, my eyes widen. It's from Daniel. Wow. That was quick. The sound of my friends chatting fades into the background as I click on it.

The quickness of his response makes me believe that maybe he is serious about academics after all.

I quickly save his number. Taking a deep breath, my fingers hover over the screen of my phone, unsure of what to type back. Should I keep it professional? Or friendly?

Finally, I decide to keep it simple and to-the-point.

Hello! Anya here.

Please save my contact, and I would prefer

to meet so that I can explain everything in detail.

The moment I hit send, I feel a pang of doubt, wondering if I sound too direct and unfriendly. I see three small dots appear on my phone screen. They blink and indicate that he's typing a response.

"Hurry up, Anya," Soph calls, a hint of impatience in her voice.

"You guys get me an iced coffee, please. I will save a table for you," I plead. They give me a thumbs-up, walking toward the counter.

Daniel:

Okay, let's meet up in the library.

Today at 7 PM, if that

works for you?

I hesitate for a moment but then type out a reply, my fingers flying across the keyboard.

Yes.

7 PM in the library is perfect.

See you there.

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I feel like I have been pranked. I have been waiting here for half an hour, but there's still no sign of Daniel. On top of that, I don't even know what he looks like. For all I know, he might already be here, laughing at how oblivious I am. But he should know who I am. My profile picture has my photo, so unless he's completely clueless, he should've spotted me by now. I glance at my watch for what feels like the hundredth time. The minutes tick by, each one making me more frustrated and angry. I check my phone for any messages or emails, but there's nothing.

I let out a sigh. Is he not coming? Did he forget? Or worse. Is he blowing me off? I take a deep breath, trying to calm down. It's only seven-fifteen. Maybe he's just running late. I will wait till seven-thirty, then I am leaving. I open his contact, looking at his profile picture. It's a golden retriever dog. Cute . It seems like he is a dog lover; at least we can bond over that if he's unbearable.

I glance around the library, noticing the other students engrossed in their studies. The soft sound of pages turning and whispers fill the quiet space. I take out my own laptop and notebook. Might as well get some work done while I wait. I am done with scrolling through business news for today.

I like being up to date about the business world, and mindless scrolling through social media makes me feel guilty. I open the recent case study I was looking at the previous evening. It is about a tech startup's rapid growth and subsequent challenges. When I study, I love to highlight everything and make my notes colorful. Black and white notes make me want to sleep. I love annotating; it keeps me engaged.

After a while, I glance up at the clock above the entrance. It's now seven twenty-five. Only five minutes left until my self-imposed deadline. I am not known for my patience. I sigh. I might just call it a day. I am exhausted.

I gather all my things and place them in my bag, ready to bolt. I hoist my bag over my shoulder and stand up, pushing back the chair. The sound of its legs scraping against the floor echoes in the otherwise quiet library, earning me a few annoyed glances from nearby students. I turn to apologize to everyone, but no one's paying me any heed. I push the chair inside the table, leaving it the way it was when I arrived. As I turn to exit, I bump into a hard wall, the impact making me stumble back.

"Ow," I say, rubbing my forehead.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?" A familiar male voice rings in my ears. I have heard him somewhere. Slowly, I look up. Standing right in front of me—looking apologetic and a bit sheepish—is the guy from this morning. What the hell? Is he some type of stalker? Or is the universe playing a joke on me? He can't stop bumping into me. I open my mouth to give him a handful of curses, but he raises his hand in surrender. "Before you say anything, it wasn't intentional, I swear." I don't buy the innocent look he has on his face.

I narrow my eyes at him. "You like bumping into me or what?" My voice drips with sarcasm.

I press a hand to my forehead. The corner of his lips curls up in a crooked grin. "Trust me, as fun as it is, bumping into you was not my idea of a good time today."

"I see you have changed," he says, gazing up and down.

"Of course, I did. You expected me to remain in those clothes all day?" I scowl at him.

“No, I was just observing, Firecracker.” He chuckles as I fume at the nickname.

“Don’t call me that,” I whisper-yell, giving apologetic looks to people who are now noticing us. I huff in annoyance, glaring at him. “What? Now, get out of my way.” His lopsided smile is almost irritating. The sight of his perfectly white teeth and jawline is pissing me off. But I’d be lying if I said he isn’t attractive, which obviously makes him even more annoying.

“Oh, come on. I know I am late, and I apologize for that, but since you’re here, let’s discuss that assignment,” he pleads.

My eyes widen in surprise. “You’re Daniel?”

“Yup, the one and only.” He grins arrogantly. His eyes roam over my face, a mix of curiosity and something else I can’t quite pinpoint. “You didn’t know me?” he asks, amusement evident in his eyes.

I raise an eyebrow at his question, feeling a pang of annoyance. What does he mean by that? “Of course, I didn’t know you,” I say with a defiant note in my voice. “Who do you think you are? Some kind of celebrity that everyone is supposed to be aware of?” I roll my eyes.

He lets out a soft chuckle, seemingly unbothered by my bluntness. Instead, he takes another step closer to me, closing the distance between us. My breath catches slightly, but I refuse to back down. I can feel the heat radiating off of his body now, and damn it, he smells good.

“Well, I happen to be the new captain of our basketball team,” he says casually, his eyes twinkling mischievously. “You’ve probably heard of me.”

I roll my eyes. Typical . Another arrogant athlete who thinks the world revolves

around him. “How original of you to assume that!” I comment. He chuckles again. He seems to find our conversation amusing, and it’s driving me up the wall. He leans casually against one of the tables, his arms crossed over his chest, and I am annoyed to note that his loose T-shirt does nothing to hide his muscular physique.

“You have a sharp tongue,” he observes, his eyes glittering with amusement. “Did anyone ever tell you that?”

“Yeah, several times actually, smartass,” I retort, folding my arms across my chest. No way I am letting him get the upper hand.

He tilts his head to the side, studying me with a keen interest. It makes me feel like a specimen under a microscope. His gaze feels too intense, almost invasive. After a moment of silence, he speaks again.

“Did someone also mention you’re cute when you’re angry?” He smiles softly. I feel my cheeks heating up at his words. Cute? Me? Pfft. I quickly regain my composure though, trying to seem unaffected.

“If you think I am cute when I am angry, get ready, because I am about to become gorgeous,” I retort. He grins widely at my snarky comment.

“I highly doubt that because you look gorgeous right now,” he replies smoothly.

His unwavering confidence only seems to rile me up more. I scoff at his compliment, crossing my arms defensively across my chest. “Oh, please, save the cheesy lines for someone who cares, pretty boy,” I snap, but even as the words leave my lips, I can feel my heart rate picking up. Why does he have this effect on me? Probably because of his annoyingly handsome face .

“You think I am pretty?” A smirk graces his features as he sees my reaction, clearly

enjoying the effect he's having on me. His ego must be soaring through the roof right now. I take a deep breath, trying to keep my heart rate in check. I wouldn't be surprised if I am shaking with anger. God, he infuriates me.

I roll my eyes at his comment, trying to appear completely unfazed. "Oh yes, I am forgetting that I'm talking to the captain of the basketball team, the most sought-after guy on campus. How silly of me for not expecting some light flirting as part of your daily routine." I take a deep breath, steadying my words. "And just because you're good-looking doesn't mean your charms work on me."

"Ah! You're calling me good-looking and charming; that's a double win, I guess." He winks.

He opens his mouth to say something again, but I walk to the other side of the table, pulling out a chair and taking a seat. Distance. I need a bit of distance. "Now, can we focus on this assignment?"

"Oh, right. The assignment," he says, feigning disappointment. "But I was just starting to enjoy our little banter."

He sits across from me, his eyes still sparkling with mischief. I roll my eyes again, feeling a mixture of annoyance and something else I can't quite identify. I take out my notes from today's lecture. "Okay, so we're still not sure about the guidelines. Professor Brown will be emailing them to us by the end of this week."

"Alright, before that..." He puts his hand in his pocket. I can't help but notice his muscular arms are on display. Wait, why am I noticing that? I quickly shake my head to snap out of it. Focus, Anya.

"Here." He holds out a twenty dollar bill. I frown.

I blink at the twenty dollar bill in his hand, confused. “Are you paying me to do the assignment on my own?” I raise an eyebrow, crossing my arms. He probably thinks he can buy his way out. Honestly, I am okay with it. He chuckles, his eyes glittering with amusement.

“No, it’s for dry cleaning. I spilled coffee on you, so it’s fair if I pay for it.” Oh, so he does remember.

“No, thanks. It’s okay. I just said it in the heat of the moment,” I reply.

“Is there any moment in your life that isn’t heated?” He snickers.

“Oh yes, there is when you’re not around. You, especially, make me...incredibly patient,” I riposte, emphasizing the last words with a pointed look. Why do I even engage with him?

He chuckles. “Wow, I didn’t know I had that effect on you.”

I shrug nonchalantly. “Consider it a special skill of yours.”

“Does that mean you look forward to our encounters?” he asks teasingly.

I meet his gaze squarely, resting my chin on my hand to hide my flushed cheeks. “Let’s just say they’ll never be boring.”

He leans in slightly, his voice dropping to a softer tone. “Good to know.” The space between us feels charged.

I am fighting the urge to roll my eyes, trying to maintain my composure. I need to escape this tension. “Anyway, it’s late, and I don’t live on campus. So, let’s meet tomorrow.”

He nods, still wearing a cheeky grin. “Alright, see you tomorrow. Good night, beautiful.”

His words linger in the air and I can’t help but feel my heart skip a beat at his words. “Don’t call me that,” I whisper, my tone sharp.

“Why not? It’s just the truth.” He shrugs. I feel my cheeks flush at his words, but I quickly try to hide it with a scowl.

“Just because it’s true doesn’t mean you have to say it,” I mutter, crossing my arms defensively .

He smirks at my reaction. I feel he is deliberately playing with me. “Whatever...” I roll my eyes. “Let’s meet at three in the afternoon tomorrow,” I reply, getting up again.

“Okay. Will Deja Brew Cafe work for you?” he asks. I nod, trying not to think about how much time I will be spending with him.

“What a waste of time,” I mutter as I walk away, leaving him behind. I give him one last look over my shoulder, he has an amused smile on his face. I turn away quickly. This isn’t going to be easy.

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DANIEL

“See you later, Cap!” Ethan exclaims, and I wave at him. I look around the locker room which is filled with the sound of chatter and clattering feet as guys walk around, getting changed. A row of lockers lines the walls, and the floor is covered with towels and discarded clothes. It’s the usual post-practice chaos. The air is filled with a mix of sweat and the scent of shower gel. Some guys are sitting on benches, talking and laughing as they change into clean clothes.

The atmosphere is relaxed. Louis pats my back. “Come on. Let’s head back,” he says coolly.

“Dude, I still don’t understand how you can not bathe and be okay with all that sweat after such a long game.” I sigh, shaking my head in disappointment.

“Not everyone is as obsessed with hygiene as you are, Danny boy,” he teases me, slinging an arm over my shoulder. He grins, clearly enjoying winding me up.

I glare at my roommate. “Some of us like to wallow in our own sweat and stink,” he says.

I scrunch up my nose in exaggerated disgust, shoving him playfully. “It’s still a wonder to me how girls fling themselves at you. ”

He feigns a hurt expression, placing a hand over his heart. “Come on, man, that stings.” He laughs. “You’ve wounded me with your words. It’s not just my charm that attracts the ladies, you know,” he wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

I chuckle. “And you don’t have to be so humble, darling.” He goes on. “You’re getting a lot of attention, too. Why don’t we host a party, dude?” He almost whines.

“You don’t even need a reason to party,” I remark. “Fine, it’s been a while anyway. And with these new responsibilities of a captain, I do need to loosen up.” I close the locker.

Louis grins at me. “I knew you’d be down for BBB,” he teases.

I furrow my brows. “What’s that?”

He grins widely. “Boobs, booze, and bangers.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Fine, but you’ll be organizing it. I’m not helping,” I say firmly.

“Aye, aye, captain!” He shoots me a mock salute.

“Just make sure you keep things under control. I don’t want my father involved in this. You know how important it is for me to prove him wrong.” His expression shifts to a somber one, and he nods.

“You go ahead. I have to meet with Anya for an assignment,” I say, pulling on my T-shirt. I can’t afford to be late. Otherwise, she’ll eat me alive today. I chuckle, recalling her flushed face.

“Who’s this Anya?” Louis nudges me, a playful smirk on his face. I roll my eyes, knowing he’s up to something.

“She’s just a classmate,” I say with a shrug. “We’re working on a project together.” He hums, clearly unconvinced. I just shake my head.

“I’ll head out then,” I say, picking up my duffel bag and handing it to him. He groans and I flash him a wide grin.

He nods, still smirking at me. “Alright. Have fun with your classmate.”

I walk away, raising my middle finger over my shoulder. I hear him laugh as I exit the arena. Running a hand through my freshly washed hair, grateful for the cool evening breeze. The walk back to the café is short, but it feels like forever when I’m already dead on my feet.

I enter the café, looking for Anya. I scan the room, my eyes skimming over students, until I spot her sitting alone at a small table. She’s typing something on her laptop, completely engrossed in her work. I can’t help but notice how cute she looks when she’s focused. Her long hair is pulled back in a loose ponytail, showcasing her delicate features. Her big brown eyes are fixed intently on her screen, her brows furrowed in concentration. She’s wearing a light sweater and jeans that hug her curves perfectly.

I walk over to her and pull out the chair on the opposite side. “Hey, I hope I’m not late,” I say with a small smile. She looks up from her laptop as I take a seat, her eyes widening for a moment before she composes herself.

“Hey,” she replies, a scowl on her face. I feel this weird urge to erase it.

“How do you like your coffee?” I ask. She looks at me, taken aback.

“Why do you want to know?” Her eyebrows furrow.

“I was just going to order one for myself, so I thought I’d get you one too.”

I rub my nape, unsure of how she’ll react. She raises an eyebrow, clearly suspicious

of my offer. "I can buy myself a coffee," she says, a hint of wariness in her voice. I sigh as I get up.

"Listen, I am sorry, Anya. I really am. Let me buy you coffee, and let's move on. It wasn't a good day for either of us yesterday," I plead.

She looks at me for a moment, her expression softening slightly. "Fine," she relents with a huff. "But only because I'm dying for a coffee. "

It's a small win, but I will take it. I smile softly, feeling relieved that she's at least willing to give me a chance to redeem myself. "Great," I say. "What's your order? My treat."

She glances down at her notes, thinking for a moment before speaking. "I'll have a caramel mocha, medium size, extra shot of espresso."

I nod, making a mental note of her order. "Got it," I say.

I make my way to the counter. "Hi, Cap!" Jacob greets me, his usual cheerful self.

"Hi, Jac. A caramel mocha, medium size, extra shot of espresso, and a regular for me." He nods.

Jacob looks up from the espresso machine and raises an eyebrow. "I wouldn't have thought I'd see you buying coffee for a girl in this lifetime." He smirks. "You're the only jock I know who isn't a serial dater."

I roll my eyes at his comment. "She's a classmate, Jacob." I inform him. I guess everyone is very concerned about my love life today. We fall silent and I tap my fingers against the counter until he turns around to hand me two cups of coffee. "Here you go, Cap. One caramel mocha for your 'classmate' and your regular," he says, his

smirk never leaving his face.

I walk to our table, placing the coffee in front of Anya. I take a seat across from her. She takes a sip from her cup and sighs, a small smile appearing on her lips. And I feel proud to know that I'm the reason—well, not actually, but I bought the coffee, so technically I am the reason.

“Thanks,” she whispers.

She eyes my coffee and scoffs. “Obviously, you would get black coffee. You have no taste at all.” She huffs. I laugh at her remark about my choice of coffee. She is so cute when she's grumpy. I am using the word ‘cute’ way too much for my liking.

I take a sip from my coffee and raise an eyebrow. “What exactly is wrong with black coffee? It's a classic.”

“Classic, my foot. It's the worst drink ever.” She pauses, her brows furrowing as if she's thinking about something. “Well, after Coca-Cola. I absolutely hate that,” she comments, shuddering slightly as if the mere thought of the drink disgusts her.

I feign shock, placing a hand dramatically on my heart. “Cola? The nectar of the Gods?” I exclaim, pretending to be offended. “You're a menace to society, you know that? Next thing I know, you'll be calling pineapple on pizza a crime.”

Her eyes widen and she gasps dramatically. “Please tell me you're kidding,” she begs.

I laugh out loud. “Of course, I'm not a monster.”

She sighs in relief. “Can we start now?” she mutters, narrowing her eyes at me. Her focus is back where it belongs.

I shoot her mock-salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

“So, what do we have to do?” I ask.

“We have to make a business plan for a small business.” She delves into the details of the assignment, and I try to listen to her carefully, but my eyes keep drifting to the strand of hair falling on her collarbone, just begging to be pushed back behind her ear. I shake my head slightly, trying to snap out of it.

I need to focus on the project, not her.

“So what do you think?” she asks, raising her eyebrow. I blink, realizing that I’ve been caught staring. I quickly look down at my lap, trying to act nonchalant.

“Uh, yeah, sounds good.” I can feel my face heating up, hoping she didn’t notice my obvious distraction. Keep it together, Daniel.

“Okay. So, let’s start.” She orders me to research certain industries that she finds interesting since I have no opinions so far. I do as I’m told, pulling out my laptop and clicking open a new tab.

Anya cracks her fingers and neck, diving back into her laptop to pull up the relevant documents. Her determination is intriguing. As she talks, her gestures are animated, her passion for the subject evident in every word. When I first met her yesterday, drenched in coffee, seething with anger, I was so enchanted by how unfiltered and beautiful she was. And then, when we met in the library, I was sure I was going to enjoy her fiery company. I can’t get her out of my mind, I guess. If I wasn’t in the situation I’m in, I would ask her out. Pretty sure she’d reject me though.

I shake my head slightly, trying to get rid of the thought. Stop it, Daniel. We’re here to work, not swoon over her. I force myself to focus back on the task at hand. I

research the topics she assigned me, compiling the points in my notes app. She keeps giving updates I never asked for, but who am I to stop her? I listen to her intently. I look at the watch.

“Should we take a break?” I suggest when I notice that we’ve been working for a while. “We’ve covered a lot already,” I add.

“No, not enough,” she says without looking up from her laptop. I shake my head, closing her laptop halfway. She gasps. “What the hell?” She opens her mouth, but I put a finger on her lips. Her lips feel soft against my skin. Her eyes grow large.

I inhale sharply. “We have a lot of time, Anya. We’ve been at it for an hour now. We need to give our minds a rest.” She folds her arms and pouts but doesn’t protest anymore. I chuckle at her antics. Damn, she’s adorable.

“I gather you take studies very seriously,” I comment.

“Well, I’m an Asian kid. I need academic validation,” she retorts. “There’s this constant pressure to excel academically.”

“Why?” I ask, and she laughs, almost evilly.

“Indians are obsessed with education. My parents don’t put so much pressure on me, but growing up with so much competition around, I just became the same as others.” She sighs, leaning back in her chair. “It’s like we’re conditioned to believe that our worth is tied to our academic achievements,” she says with a slight chuckle. “And God forbid we have any other interests or hobbies. It’s like we’re expected to be robots who only study and excel.”

“So, now that you’re here, why don’t you try chilling out a bit? I’m not saying you shouldn’t study, but being study-oriented doesn’t really mean that you will be

successful,” I comment, my voice soft but firm.

Anya smirks, folding her arms across her chest. “Oh, so you’re trying to give me life advice now?” she retaliates, a hint of amusement in her voice. “And what makes you think I don’t chill out? Just because I take my studies seriously doesn’t mean I don’t have any fun.”

“So what do you do for fun? Enlighten me, please,” I question, leaning in slightly. Anya cocks her head, thinking for a moment before answering.

“Well, I like to read, watch shows, and listen to music. And most importantly, sleep.” She sighs, putting her head down on the table. I snicker.

“Ah, sleep. Now, that’s the kind of fun I can get behind,” I say, yawning for emphasis. “But really, don’t you ever feel like you need more excitement in your life? Something that doesn’t involve staring at a book or a screen?”

Anya tilts her head, giving me a thoughtful look. “Where are you heading with this?” She narrows her eyes, scrutinizing me.

“I have no ulterior motives, I promise.” I laugh lightly. It’s so easy to converse with her and so hard at the same time, I can’t quite figure her out. “My roommate is organizing a party this weekend,” I suggest.

She lifts her head and raises a skeptical eyebrow at my suggestion. She’s not a big fan of going to parties, I can tell. “A party?” she asks, her tone laced with suspicion. “Why are you telling me that?” She raises an eyebrow. Even I don’t know why I brought up the party.

I laugh. “I am inviting you, dumbass,” I comment, digging myself deeper into the hole I’d opened moments ago.

She rolls her eyes, “And what makes you think I would want to go to a party? I’m not exactly a social butterfly. Quite the opposite actually.”

I shrug. “You never know unless you try, right?” I say casually, trying to sound convincing.

“I...uh...” she stutters. “I have been to parties.” She raises her chin in defiance.

I laugh lightly. “Make it more convincing and I’ll believe you.” I snicker. She pouts, clearly annoyed at my comment.

“Fine, I’ve never been to a party. I just don’t see the point. They’re just a waste of time.” She crosses her arms, still unconvinced. “But why would you want me at your party? We barely even know each other.”

“It’s just a party, not a life-altering decision. And we might not know each other well, but I thought you could benefit from a little adventure,” I say gently. “And I only reserve my best sales pitch for you,” I add, giving her a lazy grin.

She rolls her eyes again, but I can see her start to soften. “I’m not easily convinced, you know,” she says stubbornly. Before I can respond, her phone rings, her eyes widening as she sees the screen. “I’m sorry. I have to go, Daniel. I completely forgot I had to meet my friends right now,” she says, getting up. Disappointment bubbles in my chest, but I don’t say anything.

“Have fun.” I smile, getting up myself. I reach forward to help her gather her stuff, our hands briefly touching.

I walk out with her. “We’ll meet later if needed for the assignment,” she says.

“Yeah, no problem. We can definitely meet up. For the assignment,” I add the last

part when she shoots me a look.

As she waves me goodbye and walks away, I can't help but let out a sigh. "The invitation is still on!" I shout, watching her retreating figure. She looks at me over her shoulder once and then disappears into the crowd.

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Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:41 am

ANYA

I stare at my phone while Soph shrieks, waving it in front of me like a victory flag. Meanwhile, Siya sits beside me, trying her best to calm her down.

“Girl, what are you thinking?” Soph exclaims. “Let’s go to that freaking party,” she says, looking at Daniel’s message.

Daniel:

The invitation still stands ??

Siya looks at me and pouts. “I am not going, Anya. Please.”

“I am not going either,” I say, giving Soph a wide grin and snuggling into Siya.

Soph glares at us like an exasperated older sister. “No. You two have been cooped up in this house the entire semester. I’ve kept quiet till now, but enough is enough.”

“What would I even do there? I don’t drink. I don’t dance. I don’t flirt and I definitely don’t do whatever nonsense happens at these parties.” I whine. “What’s the point if I won’t enjoy it?”

Soph plants her hands on her hips, her expression a mix of disbelief and frustration. “You guys are so lame. It’s a party, not a conference on economic theory. We’re going to unwind, have fun, and maybe make some bad decisions!”

“And you’ll be making them alone,” I mutter.

“Fine,” she snaps, her voice thick with sarcasm. “Stay home. Be boring. Knit a sweater or something.”

I roll my eyes, “Knitting isn’t boring.” Siya frowns, She hesitates, her gaze flitting between Soph and me. “Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to try, Anya. It might even be...fun?”

“You just said you didn’t want to go!” I say, narrowing my eyes at her.

She laughs softly. “Yeah, but I’m also not the one who promised to make the most of her college life.”

I sigh, guilt trickling in. “Will you come with me, then?”

“You know how I get around people,” she says quietly. “Besides, I don’t want you to feel like you have to babysit me.”

“I don’t babysit you. As a matter of fact, I like spending time with you. You’ve been my best friend since I was peeing in my bed.” I grin at her.

Siya twists her face. “Why do you have to put it like that?” She makes a face and I laugh.

She playfully swats at my arm before continuing, “Go on, it’ll be fun. If not, call me. We will chat until this party monster is done.” She glares at Sophia who smiles sheepishly at us. I wonder how she is our friend, considering her very vibrant personality. She’s just so outgoing and bubbly. Sometimes, it feels like a privilege that she wants to hang out with us .

It was my first day on campus and I was struggling to figure out where my next class

was when this whirlwind of energy—Sophia—showed up. She spotted my confused look, grabbed my arm, and dragged me along, all while introducing herself and rattling off fun facts about the campus. By the time I found my class, she'd somehow convinced me to join her for coffee after. And I never say no to coffee. I am not sure how it happened, but that one random encounter turned into a friendship I didn't realize I needed.

Soph gets on her knees, breaking my train of thought. “And I will be with you. You just have to say one word and I will bring you back to your haven safely, I promise.” I roll my eyes at her dramatic antics and laugh.

Maybe it won't be that bad. I take a deep breath, feeling my resolve weakening under their persuasion. I did promise myself that I would enjoy my college life and meet tons of new people.

I look back and forth between my two friends, still feeling a little bit hesitant and unsure. But the more I think about it, the more I realize that they're right. It's just a party. What's the worst that could happen?

And besides, Soph promised to stick by me the whole time, so I won't be completely out of my comfort zone. “Fine.” I cave, trying to sound annoyed but failing miserably. “But if it gets boring or uncomfortable, you better not complain.”

Soph lets out cheers of victory, high-fiving with Siya like she just won a major battle. And I just shake my head. I don't know what I am signing up for.

“Now, it's your turn to be persuaded!” Sophia exclaims, pointing her finger at Siya.

Her eyes widen. “No, let her be, Soph.” I sigh. Soph pouts, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Why not?” Soph whines .

“I don’t want to, Sophie. And you know I would say yes if you insist once more, but I am not comfortable. I promise I will join you next time.” Siya smiles softly, and I guess she doesn’t know this yet, but no one can ever deny her something. At least not me. I am too fond of her.

Soph sighs. “Fine. At least one wicket is down.” She grins as she looks at me. And I smile.

I glance at Siya, my face twisted in concern. “You will be alone here. Arnav is going out, too.” I inform her.

She smiles. “Zeke will be here,” she says shyly. Zeke is my brother’s friend. He was in need of a new place to live, and Arnav asked me and Siya if we were okay with him moving in. We said yes, but if I had known that he is a heartbreaker, a playboy, I would have said no because I can’t stand Siya getting hurt anymore. I had heard rumors he had been dating two girls at the same time. Now I usually don’t trust rumors but it’s for the safety of my friend. So, when she mentions his name, I get a little worried. But then again Arnav won’t bring someone like that near us so I doubt those rumors are true.

Sophia whistles and I narrow my eyes. “You do know he’s a playboy, right?” Siya looks at me for a moment. She opens her mouth and closes it. It seems like she wants to say something, but she decides against it, nodding instead.

“I am aware of that, but we’re just friends, that’s all.” She flushes a little.

I shake my head, a little concerned for her wellbeing. “I don’t know, Siya. Are you sure about hanging out with Zeke?”

Siya puts on a defiant expression. “We’re just friends. I can handle myself.” I don’t say anything, but I might need to talk to her later.

“Now, come on. We’ve got to get dressed,” Soph exclaims, pulling me off the bed. “And don’t you dare try to wear your jeans and tops. I am going to dress you tonight.” I open my mouth in protest, and she silences me with her finger. “Ah, ah. No complaints.” She turns to Siya and winks at her. “Would you help me, babe?” Siya nods, getting off the bed herself.

I roll my eyes, already feeling a sense of resignation. Soph can be pretty persuasive when she wants to be, and I know better than to argue with her. Especially when she’s got Siya on her side.

“Fine,” I grumble, allowing myself to be dragged into the room. “But I draw the line at anything too revealing.”

As I follow Soph and Siya into the latter’s room, I brace myself for what’s to come. I know that when it comes to fashion, my friends can be a little...intense.

“Okay, first things first,” Soph says, her eyes scanning me up and down. “We need to find something that’s both comfortable and flattering. No offense, but your usual jeans and T-shirt combo isn’t going to cut it tonight.”

“Trust me, you have made that clear.” I glare at her, earning a sheepish smile from her. “But I’m not wearing anything too flashy. Or short. Or tight,” I mutter.

“Don’t worry,” Soph says, waving her hand dismissively. “We won’t make you look like a disco ball. We just want to show off your best features.”

Soph rummages through the suitcase that she brought with her; she is going to stay with us this week because her mother is out of town and she did not want to stay

alone. She pulls out a few dresses. I watch as she lays them out on the bed, my stomach turning at how short and tight they are. They're all pretty but way too revealing for my taste. I eye the dresses warily, feeling a wave of anxiety wash over me.

"Soph, these are all a little too revealing for me. Can't I just wear something simple?" I ask.

Soph rolls her eyes, clearly not taking my concerns seriously. "Simple? We're not going to a funeral, Anya. We're going to a party. You need to look sexy." She winks .

I look through the dresses. A black silhouette catches my eye. The fabric is silky and luxurious, shimmering in the light. It's beautiful and the simplest of the ones she has pulled out.

"Good choice," Siya says, offering me a small smile. It is certainly the least revealing of the options Soph has presented, but it still feels very daring compared to my usual style. Soph grins, noticing the way I'm looking at the dress. "I see that little sparkle in your eye, Anya. You know you like it."

I bite my lip as my mind drifts to Daniel. He was right; I should be more adventurous, and the thought of him seeing me in this dress makes me feel a little flustered.

Soph chuckles, noticing the change in my expression. "Ah-ha! I knew it! You're starting to like the idea."

I can't deny it; her words have sparked something in me. It's the thought of being more fun, I guess. I don't care. All I know is I am trying to step out of my comfort zone, and it's just a stupid party. So, I just nod slowly.

"But if I have a wardrobe malfunction, I'm suing you" I warn her.

She rolls her eyes and says, "Please, you'll be the hottest lawsuit in history!" She winks at me.

She takes the dress from the rack and holds it up against me, inspecting the fit. "You're going to look smokin' in this," she says with a smirk. "Guys will be lining up for you."

My cheeks heat up at her words. I'm not used to this kind of attention, and the idea of guys lining up for me is more terrifying than exciting.

"I don't know," I protest weakly. "I don't want to draw that much attention. I just want to blend in and maybe have some fun."

Soph chuckles, clearly amused by my hesitation. "You can blend in and still look hot," Siya assures me.

"You're going to look incredible. Just trust me," Soph adds. I change into the dress, and Soph forces me onto the bed. "Now, stay quiet and let us do our work." Soph starts working on my makeup while Siya does my hair.

I sit there obediently, letting Soph and Siya work their magic on me. Soph applies some light makeup. I'm still feeling a little nervous about the whole thing, but I have to admit, it does feel kind of nice to be pampered. Siya finishes styling my hair into loose waves that cascade down my shoulders, adding to the overall look. I take a deep breath and look at myself in the mirror again, feeling a surge of surprise at the transformation. Soph hands me a pair of earrings, and I put them on, completing the look.

"There," Soph says with a satisfied grin. "Now you're ready to conquer the party."

I can't help but smile back at her infectious enthusiasm. "Thanks, Soph," I say

sincerely, feeling genuinely grateful for her efforts.

Siya gives me a warm side hug. “You look amazing, Anya,” she says softly.

After some final adjustments, we gather our things. As I reach for my purse, my eyes unintentionally catch my reflection in the mirror by the door. I pause for a second, barely recognizing the girl staring back at me. The dress fits perfectly, hugging me in all the right places, and the subtle makeup highlights my features just enough. I brush a loose strand of hair behind my ear and look away quickly, feeling a little self-conscious. “Take care, and if you need something, call me,” I say, slinging my bag over my shoulder and following Sophie out.

Siya smiles. “I will be fine.” I nod slowly, a little hesitant. “You guys enjoy, okay?!” she says as we close the door behind her. I exhale, letting go of the worry I feel bubbling in my chest.

As we walk toward the fraternity house where the party is being held, I try to ignore the butterflies in my stomach. This isn’t something I do every day, but tonight feels different. Maybe it’s the excitement in the air. My mind wanders back to Daniel. Am I agreeing to do this because I want to see him? I don’t think so. I mean, why would I be thinking about him at all, right? He is just a classmate, my project partner, and a very annoyingly good-looking guy.

As we approach the fraternity house, the thumping music and bright lights spill out into the night air. The party is already in full swing, a crowd of students gathered outside, laughing and chatting loudly.

Soph grabs my hand and pulls me closer to her, sensing my nervousness. “Don’t worry, you’ve got this,” she reassures me. “Just have fun and enjoy yourself.”

Yes. Just have fun and enjoy yourself!

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Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:41 am

DANIEL

“Hey, Dan,” Bethany says, walking up to me.

“Hi, Bethany.” I smirk down at her as she sidles up to me. She flashes me a sultry smile, pulling me onto the dance floor.

“Let’s dance.” She calls over the booming music.

“Bethany,” I groan.

“Come on, loosen up a little. We can have fun later.” She cocks a brow at me, emphasizing fun .

“Fine.” I let her guide me through the dance floor, pulling me into the fray of the crowd. The music is loud and chaotic, couples pressing into each other on the dance floor. Multicolored lights flash and swirl, casting a kaleidoscope of hues across the packed room. The air is thick with the mingling scents of perfume, cologne, and spilled drinks, creating a cocktail of aromas that screams indulgence. The dance floor is alive with movement, bodies swaying and grinding together in perfect sync with the pounding bass.

I try my best to keep up with Bethany, mimicking the movements of the other couples. I am not particularly adept at dancing, but she appears to be enjoying herself, her hands caressing my body with playful abandon. As the music pulses through the room, I feel Bethany’s body pressing against mine. Her hands seem to be everywhere, tracing circles on my chest or tangling in the collar of my shirt. I chuckle at her

eagerness.

“You’re quite insistent tonight, huh?” I tease, feeling her hands roaming all over my body. The music thumps loudly and the strobe lights cast a surreal glow around us. Bethany grins at me, drawing herself closer, her body tightly pressed against mine.

“You’re not complaining, are you?”

I chuckle, my hands resting on her hips, pulling her closer. “No, I’m not complaining,” I reply, leaning down to murmur in her ear.

I see a familiar figure sitting in the corner, using their phone. I squint my eyes to get a better look. It’s Anya. My breath hitches as she stands up, looking around. She looks like perfection. I can’t help but let my eyes roam over her figure, taking in the way her outfit hugs her curves. So she came. A small smile forms on my lips. Bethany notices the shift in my attention, and her own grip on me tightens. “You’re distracted,” she mutters, following my line of sight.

I see Anya walk out into the backyard. I push myself away from Bethany, my mind completely occupied with Anya.

“I am sorry. I have to go.” Bethany doesn’t protest. She just nods and mingles with the crowd. She knows how it works with me—no strings attached, no complications, no drama at all. I’m not one to play games or chase fleeting connections.

I make my way out of the crowd. I step out onto the back porch, the cool air a welcome change from the stifling heat indoors. I take a deep breath and look around, taking in the sight of a few couples making out under the shadows of the trees. I can hear the faint sound of music wafting from the open windows and the distant rumble of the party inside.

I spot her sitting on a cool rock. The breeze plays with her hair, making it fall loosely around her shoulders. Her dress flows gently with the wind, and even in the dim light, she looks striking. As I walk toward her, her figure becomes clearer in the soft light of the moon. She's staring out into the night, her posture calm yet pensive, as if the world beyond the darkness holds answers she's searching for.

The moonlight brushes against her skin, giving her an almost ethereal glow. Her hair catches the faint breeze, a few strands falling into her face, but she doesn't seem to notice. She looks...beautiful. Not in the effortless way she usually does, but in a way that makes my chest tighten like this quiet, unguarded version of her is a secret I'm not supposed to see.

I pause for a moment, taking in the way the cold air makes her flushed cheeks even more rosy. As if my legs have a mind of their own, they shift closer to her. Anya turns around and gasps. "You scared me!" she exclaims, putting her hand on her chest. Her eyes and nose are red; she turns around, furiously wiping her cheeks.

"What's wrong?" I ask, concerned. Seeing her rub her cheeks makes me wonder if she was crying out here. The thought makes me feel a strange pang in my chest; I don't like the idea.

"Nothing. Just leave me alone, please," she says, her voice wobbly. I take a seat next to her on the rock. I can feel the heat from her body next to me.

"I will sit here," I announce.

"I said the exact opposite of that," she mutters, a small smile playing on her lips that makes me smile too.

"What are you doing outside?" I ask gently.

“On your suggestion to be adventurous, I agreed to come to this freak house.” She throws her hands in the air. “You were wrong, captain. This isn’t fun at all,” she says, “And folks here should respect the effort I am putting in to not mass murder people.” Her eyes glint darkly.

“I am sorry,” I apologize. We sit in silence. I look at her face illuminated in the soft glow of the moon. She’s a mystery to me; she has been so fierce all the times I have met her. I think it’s the most I’ve seen of her raw emotions. “You really hate parties that much?” I ask slowly.

She’s silent for a while before she speaks. “All my life, I’ve been the goody two-shoes. I thought when I got away from home, I’d finally open up a bit. Discover my true self and all that. But look at me—so miserable and conveniently hiding here. I’ll never be able to come out of my comfort zone. I guess I’m just a prude.” She sniffles, then adds softly, “Not that there’s anything wrong with that. I just...I wish I could let loose a little sometimes, you know.” The vulnerability in her voice and words makes my heart clench.

“You know,” I start slowly. “Being a goody two-shoes doesn’t mean you can’t have fun. You’re trying to open up and explore your true self, and that’s courageous. It’s normal to feel uncomfortable in new situations. Especially parties.”

I reach out and gently wipe away a stray tear from her cheek. Her breath hitches at the unexpected touch, and she looks at me with wide eyes.

“Moreover,” I say softly. “Imagine how catastrophic it would be if you weren’t prissy. People would be dead by now.” She lets out a soft laugh, her eyes still a little watery, but there’s a spark of humor in them, too.

“You have a point, I suppose,” she replies with a small smile.

“But it’s not just about the parties,” she continues quietly. “I feel like I’m always holding back, like I can never really be myself. I know I may be a bit of a tightly wound psycho, but sometimes I just want to break free, you know.”

I nod, understanding exactly what she means. “Yeah, I know,” I say, my voice low and sympathetic. “It’s like you’re always stuck playing a part, pretending to be something you’re not. And the longer you keep it up, the harder it is to let go.”

She is silent for a moment. As she studies me, I give her a smile. “I know I am handsome, but don’t check me out so shamelessly, Ms. Anya,” I joke.

She doesn’t crack the smile that I was hoping to see. “You seem to understand this way better than you should.” She narrows her eyes, observing me.

“I guess empathy is my thing,” I chuckle, trying to remain casual. But she doesn’t take her eyes off me, studying me intently for a few more beats, as if trying to see past the surface.

“Is that so?” Her gaze feels like a physical weight, and despite my lighthearted attempt to dismiss the question, I can feel her seeing past my casual facade. “Okay,” she says slowly. I can see she’s not fully convinced, but she lets it go, and I sigh silently.

We sit in silence for a while, the distant hum of the party fading into the background. She sits close enough for me to feel the warmth of her presence, and somehow, it’s all I can focus on.

“You should go. I don’t want to keep you from enjoying the party,” she says softly, her voice carrying just enough uncertainty to make me glance at her.

“I’d rather stay here,” I reply, surprising even myself.

“Why?” she whispers, her gaze meeting mine for a brief moment before flickering away. There’s a vulnerability in her tone, a softness that calls to me in a way that has me shifting in place.

“Because I want to,” I say, as if that’s enough of an explanation. And maybe it is, for now.

Our fingers brush, a fleeting touch that sends a spark up my arm. I glance down at her hand, then at her, watching the way her lips part ever so slightly. Did she feel that too?

The moment lingers, heavy and charged, and I’m not sure what to do with it. Her fingers remain where they are, barely grazing mine. It’s such a small gesture, not even a proper touch, but I can’t seem to ignore it.

She’s trouble. I know it without needing to put it into words. The way she carries herself, the way her presence pulls me in without even trying—it’s unsettling. I barely know her, yet she’s in my head now, taking up space I didn’t realize was vacant.

Trouble because I shouldn’t be here, sitting with her while the rest of the party blurs into irrelevance. Trouble because I can’t stop noticing the delicate curve of her profile in the moonlight, the soft sweep of her hair, or the way her lips press together when she thinks.

I shouldn’t be so aware of her. But I am. And that’s why staying here feels like the worst idea I’ve had in a long time.

Her eyes flicker down to our hands, and for a moment, she seems to hesitate as if confused whether she should pull away or not. But she doesn’t. I suddenly find myself wishing she would shift a little closer, hold onto me tighter. The silence

stretches between us, but it's not awkward. Our fingers remain touching, sending small jolts of electricity through me every time they move even slightly. I can't help but wonder if she's feeling the same way.

I sneak a glance at her out of the corner of my eye, trying to gauge her thoughts. Her expression is unreadable, focused on the horizon, her lower lip caught slightly between her teeth. I link my pinkie with hers, waiting for her to push away. When she doesn't, I sigh in relief. The small gesture feels intimate—almost more intimate than a full handhold. I look away and take a deep breath.

“I don't think I told you,” I say, and she looks at me, her brows furrowed. “You look beautiful.” Her expression softens and a small smile forms on her lips. The compliment seems to catch her off-guard.

“Thank you,” she replies quietly, her gaze flickering away. “You look handsome, too,” she says after a moment, her gaze drifting to my face.

She takes a deep breath, her fingers wrapping tightly around mine, making my heart thump in my chest. I smile at her and slowly, our pinkies interlock tightly. Her grip is warm and comfortable. Her touch makes me feel strangely content.

“So, tell me something about yourself,” she says.

Her question catches me off guard. And against my better judgment, I ask, “What do you want to know?”

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ANYA

“Tell me something no one else knows,” I don’t know where the question emerges from but it is spilling from my lips before I can stop myself.

A smirk plays on his lips. “Wow, you really took the opportunity. You’re putting me on the spot here.”

His smirk widens, revealing a dimple in his cheek that I have never seen before. It makes him look so unfairly handsome. “Alright then, since you asked so nicely ...”

He pauses for a moment, thinking, and then leans in close so only I can hear him. My heart rate increases. The proximity of his body allows me to smell the cologne he’s wearing—a subtle yet distinctly masculine scent that makes me strangely lightheaded. As he begins to speak, his lips are right next to my ear, his voice soft and low. “Here we go...” he begins, his warm breath tickling my neck, sending a shiver down my spine. I try to focus on his voice and not on the way his closeness is making me feel. His scent, the heat of his breath against my skin, makes me feel strangely breathless. “All I will say is, jail is no fun.”

My eyes widen at his words, and my head snaps towards him. Our noses are almost touching, our faces so close together that I can see the freckles on his cheeks. I feel the warmth of his breath on my lips.

I’m so close to him that I can see the tiny scars on his face. The slight indentation left by a faded injury that somehow only makes him look more endearingly rugged. He’s not just gorgeous but also impossibly real and touchable.

“You’ve been to jail?” I whisper, ignoring the way his eyes travel between my eyes and my lips.

“Yes. Once.” His eyes glint in the dark. “In Monopoly.” There’s a pause. I blink rapidly. He bursts into laughter, his head thrown back in unrestrained guffaws.

I swat his arm playfully. “You bastard!” I huff, trying to suppress a smile. “You had me thinking you were some kind of hardened criminal or something!”

He grins, still chuckling at my reaction. “Sorry, I couldn’t resist,” he says in between laughs. “But seriously, Monopoly does bring out the worst in people. I’ve seen families torn apart over that game.”

“I can’t believe I fell for that,” I smile.

He shakes his head, still amused at his own joke. I can’t help but smile despite myself. His laughter is infectious. “It’s your turn now,” he says, leaning back against the rock and looking at me expectantly. If he thinks I did not notice how swiftly he changed the topic and make it about me, he’s wrong. But I will play along because I don’t want to intrude and make him feel uncomfortable.

What do I even tell him? I don’t have any secrets. I have not had an interesting life. All I ever did was study. Yes, I did have my teenage rebel period when I decided to get an extra ear piercing which I later regretted seeing the look on my parents face.

“Well, I won’t say it’s a secret,” I look into his eyes. “But it’s something most people don’t know about me. At least here, because I didn’t share it with them. I am a pure Desi girl. I love Bollywood music, movies, and everything that connects me to my roots.” I play with my hair, unsure whether I want to know his reaction or not. When I was new here and trying to make new friends, whenever I talked to them about Bollywood or India in general, they laughed at me. I mean, it can be a little vibrant

and dramatic—fine, a lot dramatic—but still, it’s beautiful, and I love my culture. I just stopped mentioning it to everyone. If they don’t like it, they won’t hear it from me.

“What’s your favorite movie? Recommend me something.” He smiles. Seeing his eyes twinkle with curiosity, the way he is interested in knowing more about it rather than laughing at my choices, my heart beats faster.

“I am absolutely obsessed with Shahrukh Khan. So any one of his movies works for me. But I love, love, love My Name Is Khan and Dear Zindagi . They’re literally works of art.” I buzz with excitement. “There’s also Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi , even though it’s a little stupid. But my God, it’s just a wonder how his chemistry with any heroine is on point.” I smile widely.

I turn to look at him, finding him staring at me, a small smile on his face. “What?” I say, a little embarrassed about my ranting. He shakes his head.

“Guess I will have to check it out then,” he says. “I was not expecting that.”

I tilt my head in confusion. “What do you mean?” I ask.

“Seeing how feisty you are, I thought you’d be into crime documentaries and all.”

I smirk, feeling a little bold. I signal for him to come a bit closer. When he does, my breath stalls in my throat, but I manage to speak. “You’ve guessed it right! I do know multiple ways to murder someone. I like reading murder mysteries, and I’m obsessed with crime documentaries.” I wink at him.

“Please don’t hurt me, firecracker.” He raises his hands in surrender and I roll my eyes, chuckling.

“Oh, don’t worry.” I grin, leaning toward him. “I wouldn’t dream of hurting you...too much.” He laughs, the sound sending a strange flutter through my stomach. I realize with a start that I might actually be enjoying myself.

Before he can respond, I add quickly, “I’m not exactly a people person, you know.” I try to brush it off, but his expression shifts, his eyes darkening for a moment.

“Firecracker.” He smiles, the corner of his mouth lifting in a half-smile, that now-familiar nickname escaping his lips. There’s a playful gleam in his eyes as he looks at me, the intensity of his gaze making it hard to focus on anything else. He leans a little closer, and I can feel the heat radiating off him. “I’m glad to know I’m someone you trust then,” he murmurs, his voice low and smooth.

I lean back against the rock, trying to calm the strange flutters his voice causes in my chest. “Well, you better count yourself lucky then.” I huff, trying to sound nonchalant. “I don’t just open up to anyone.” That’s true and it’s a mystery even to me why I’m talking to this guy.

I study his face for a moment, taking in the way his smile curves his lips, the stubble on his jaw, and the way his eyes seem to hold a depth that I can’t quite decipher. It’s both fascinating and alarming how much he affects me.

My phone rings, breaking the silence. I almost fall off the rock, but he holds my arm, stabilizing me.

“Whoa. You okay there?” he asks, and I nod, trying to ignore the lingering touch of his fingers on my arm, that felt oddly electric against my skin. I reach for my phone and see that Sophia is calling me. Her name flashes on the screen, and I thank her silently for interrupting this moment.

“Hey! Where are you?!” she yells over the loud music playing inside, worry lacing

her voice. She was with me the whole time but I felt guilty that she wasn't able to enjoy the party because of me so after a lot of 'I will be fine' she finally left.

"I am in the backyard. I will meet you inside," I add.

Daniel enacts something with his hand. "What?" I ask, covering the speaker.

"I will book you a cab," he says. I open my mouth, but before I can say anything, he says, "Don't protest, firecracker." He sighs.

"Fine," I respond.

"Meet me outside. Our cab is on the way." Daniel gives me a smile as he looks up from his phone. My heart leaps at the sight of his dimple, and I smile back.

"Okay," Sophia replies, and I end the call, standing up, feeling my sore bum.

"Ugh, it's going to hurt, but I guess it was worth it." I whisper.

"I will see you around then," he says. I nod, trying to act nonchalant, but I'm acutely aware of the disappointment I feel at our time together coming to an end.

"See you around," I murmur, my eyes lingering on him for a moment longer than necessary.

I turn to leave, but before I can take a step, I hear his voice again. "Firecracker."

I turn back to him, raising an eyebrow, my heart skipping a beat at the nickname. "What?"

"Text me when you reach home," he says. I can feel my cheeks flush, and my heart

feels a bit drunk. I try to hide it, but I can feel a strange fluttering in the pit of my stomach.

“Why?” I try to sound unaffected, but my voice comes out a little breathless. He takes another step closer, his eyes lingering over my face.

“Because I want to make sure you reach home safely,” he replies. “And moreover, it’s my responsibility since I was the one who invited you here.” He gives me a forced smile.

I can’t help but feel a pang of disappointment at his words. Of course , I think bitterly. He's just being nice . I force a smile back, trying to hide my feelings that are hurt for some inexplicable reason. “Yeah, sure,” I say. “I will text you when I reach home.” And with one last look, I walk away from him.

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DANIEL

Going to a lecture on only two hours of sleep is torture, especially for a subject you don't like. I had decided not to attend any business management lectures, but here I am, going just to see a certain brown-eyed, black-haired girl who seems to have me wrapped around her pretty fingers.

I grumble to myself as I walk across campus, my thoughts drifting back to last night. I ended up watching the movie she mentioned. I don't even know why—maybe her excitement got to me. The movie was fine, and the actor? Yeah, I get why she's obsessed. But the thing that stuck with me wasn't the movie—it was her.

That's the problem. She's on my mind too much, and it's messing with my head. I don't do this—watching recommended movies, attending boring lectures just to see someone, or thinking about how her laugh sounded long after she's gone.

It's not like me, and it's not supposed to be.

As I approach the classroom, I spot her sitting in the second row, her head bent down as she scribbles something in her notebook. She's dressed in a simple t-shirt and jeans, yet she manages to look effortlessly beautiful.

I take a deep breath and walk over to her, taking the seat next to her. She looks up, her brown eyes meeting mine, and I feel a familiar flutter in my chest.

“Morning,” I murmur, my eyes lingering on her face for a moment before I turn away to take out my notebook and pen.

“Hmm,” is all she says. What the-? I cock an eyebrow at her.

“I haven’t had coffee. Don’t mess with me right now,” she says grumpily.

I chuckle softly, a small smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. “You’re obsessed with coffee, aren’t you?” I comment. “Do you even drink something else?” I ask, genuinely eager to know.

“Water,” she says. “Occasionally though.” She glares.

I raise an eyebrow, a smirk playing on my lips. “You mean to tell me you run on coffee alone? You must be one walking caffeine addict,” I tease, watching her every movement intently.

She rolls her eyes at my comment and replies, “What can I say? Coffee is the fuel of creativity. It’s the elixir of life for people like me.” She grins slightly, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “And the caffeine addiction is just a small price to pay.”

I laugh, unable to help myself from finding her cheeky humor endearing. “Elixir of life, huh?” I echo, my smirk still in place. “I think you might have a case of caffeine insanity,” I tease, enjoying the way her eyes narrow at me.

She lets out a scoff, her eyes sparkling with mock indignation. “Caffeine insanity? I prefer to call it caffeine enlightenment,” she says, her tone dripping with sarcasm. My smile widens.

“I’ll buy you coffee after class,” I announced. Her jaw drops open, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Why—why would you do that?” She stutters, her voice laced with disbelief. Well, the real reason would be that I love seeing her reaction when she takes the first sip of her

coffee, but I am definitely not saying that out loud .

I roll my eyes, pretending to be exasperated. “Because I’m a generous soul,” I tease, a playful smirk on my lips. “And I don’t want you to end up in jail because you’re caffeine deprived.” I watch as her surprise turns into a mixture of suspicion and curiosity. “Relax, firecracker. It’s just coffee.”

She looks at me skeptically, her eyes narrowing. “Just coffee, huh? And what do you get out of all this generosity?” She crosses her arms over her chest and glares at me, clearly not convinced.

I chuckle, enjoying the sight of her stubbornness. “What? I can’t buy you a coffee?” I reply, feigning innocence. “Plus, I am doing this for the greater good of society. It will be added as a good deed of the day since I am saving everyone. You’re a menace when you’re angry.” I wink at her. “Experienced firsthand. If we weren’t in public space, you would have definitely killed me.” I chuckle. She swats my arm, but a small smile forms on her face, which makes my heart swell with pride that I am the reason behind it.

Her attention shifts as the professor starts the lecture, but I barely pay any attention to it. My focus is solely on the girl beside me, the sound of her soft breathing and the light scratching of her pen consuming my senses. I can’t help but sneak glances at her every now and then, taking in the way her brows furrow in concentration and the way her lips purse as she listens. The faint hum of the projector fills the room as sunlight streams through the blinds, casting stripes across her notebook.

She tears a page from her notebook. I look at her in surprise as she scribbles something on it and passes it to me.

STOP STARING!

My smile widens as I read the small note. I look at her, only to find her shooting daggers at me with her glare. I suppress a chuckle, taking out my pen and scribbling a response.

Can't help it. You're more interesting than the lecture.

She scoffs, rolling her eyes at my comment, but I don't miss the way the corners of her mouth twitch up ever so slightly. She glances at the professor, seemingly refocusing her attention on the lecture.

Yet, within minutes, her gaze drifts toward me again, only to find me watching her with an amused expression. She quickly averts her eyes, a hint of pink spreading across her cheeks.

She glances in my direction again, and this time I wink at her, making her cheeks flush with a deeper shade of pink. She scowls at my gesture, but there's a hint of a smile in her eyes. Despite her attempts to ignore me, she can't seem to keep her gaze off me, and that makes me incredibly giddy. She passes me a note again.

What do you want?

For someone who claims to be studious, you're definitely not studying.

I scribble and pass the note to her. She quickly grabs it from me, scowling at me before reading it. Her eyes widen, and she looks at me, her face flushed. Oh, this is going to be fun. She takes the paper and furiously writes on it. I can feel the feistiness radiating off of her.

First of all, I am multitasking. Studying and secretly rolling my eyes at you. It's a talent. And secondly, if you're such a model student, why don't you pay attention and let others do the same?

I smirk as I read her response. She's fiery, and I find it utterly amusing. I quickly scrawl back, my hand movements swift and confident.

Firstly, your eye-rolling skills definitely need some work. And secondly, I am paying attention, just not on the lecture.

She wrinkles her nose in annoyance, her eyes narrowing as she reads my reply. I can practically see the steam coming out of her ears. After a moment, she snatches the pen from me and begins to write.

As she writes her response, I can't help but lean in a little closer, my eyes glued to her every move. Finally, she passes the note back to me. I take it, my heart racing with anticipation.

Oh, really? And what exactly are you paying attention to, if not the lecture? Enlighten me, please.

I look at her sassy reply and let out a small laugh.

You, obviously. I'm studying the art of secretly pissing you off. Have I passed?

She rolls her eyes, but her cheeks redden.

Definitely. With an A grade. I'm kind of jealous of all the people who haven't met you.

She may act like she's annoyed, but I know deep down she's enjoying our banter. The way she blushes and her eyes sparkle with hidden amusement doesn't escape my notice. I gasp slowly.

I am hurt.

I write back. I feign hurt, her face falls, and she writes something hastily.

I am sorry. I meant it as a joke. I am glad we met.

My heart pounds. I look back at her. She holds an expectant smile. Her eyes search mine, silently asking for reassurance. I can't help but revel in the effect I have on her and the way she quickly tries to comfort me with a hopeful smile.

Oh, I know you were joking. I was just pulling your leg.

I look up at her, a playful smile playing on my lips. She narrows her eyes at me, but I can tell she's suppressing her amusement. She playfully rolls her eyes.

Please act your age.

I raise an eyebrow, my smirk growing wider.

I don't know how to act my age. I scribble in response, my handwriting getting more and more carefree as our banter continues. You see, I've only been this age once.

I see her lips twitch, her efforts to suppress her smile failing. She folds the paper, keeping it inside her book. She glares at me and mouths, "Let me study."

I feign an innocent expression, raising my hands in mock surrender. I suppose this lecture isn't as bad as I thought it would be. My father would feel victorious, but who cares if I can spend some time with Anya? I glance at her, a half-smile still playing at her lips as she takes her notes, making me smile in return. I think I like being in her company more than I care to admit.

ANYA

“You know, I really feel like we aren’t seeing eye to eye,” Daniel says. He grins lazily as we discuss which is the best superpower: invisibility or teleportation. My vote goes to teleportation; it would save so much time and money, not to mention how beneficial it would be for the environment.

I scoff, swatting his arm. “That’s because you’re taller than me, asshole.” I glare at him. I sip the coffee that he just bought for me. My eyes flutter closed; this is heaven. I thought he was joking during the lecture, but he actually accompanied me to the cafe and ordered the coffee, remembering exactly how I like it. He chuckles at my expression. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the hum of conversation fill the air as we settle into a corner table.

“I do agree it’s a good superpower, but invisibility tops it for me. But nothing can top mind reading.” I can’t help but roll my eyes at his choice. Invisibility over teleportation? Seriously? But then again, he always has a way of surprising me with his choices. And he’s so confident about it, too.

“Mind reading? Really?” I scoff, shaking my head. “That’s just plain creepy, Daniel. You really want to know what people are thinking about you all the time? ”

“It would be fun, don’t you think?” His eyes glint mischievously.

I laugh, shaking my head. “I hold grudges, captain. I would definitely not want to hear someone badmouth me.”

“I do know that pretty well!” he exclaims. “Besides, I would never badmouth you,” he says it so casually, unaware of the effect his words have on me. “Not even in my mind.” He sips his coffee. I can feel my heart skip a beat, hearing his words. It’s such a small thing to say, but the sincerity behind it throws me. I glance at him, unsure how to respond.

We’re just assignment partners. That’s all this is supposed to be. Yet here we are, sitting in a café, sharing coffee and laughing over superpowers like we’ve known each other for years. Daniel is confident, easygoing, and has this knack for making everything feel casual—even when it’s not. Meanwhile, I’m sitting here overanalyzing every little thing, trying to make sense of why this feels so different. It’s confusing, really. He’s supposed to be just another loud, self-assured guy I have to work with, but the way he remembers how I like my coffee and says things so effortlessly? It’s throwing me completely off balance.

I try to maintain my composure, but the warmth spreading through my chest is undeniable. He smirks, and I roll my eyes. “Why are we even discussing this?” I ask, trying to sound composed, propping my chin on my hand.

“Because you started it,” he says casually, shrugging.

I gasp. “I started it?” I ask. “You started it. Whose question was it: Who’s your favorite superhero?” I scoff. I take a bite of pancake and groan. He snickers.

“Okay, fine. That’s not the point. The point is, before I forget, I have to tell you something.”

I stop midway. “Oh?” I raise an eyebrow, curious. “What is it?”

“It’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you since this morning,” he says, his voice suddenly serious. He pauses as if building up the courage to speak. I look at him,

waiting for him to continue, a sense of curiosity mixed with a touch of anxiety creeping in. My heartbeat quickens. Is something wrong?

Finally, he speaks again, his voice almost a whisper.

“I...I want to ask you something but I’m not sure how you’ll react,” he says, his eyes locked on mine.

“You’re scaring me, Daniel. What is it?” My heart is now practically racing in my chest, and I feel a knot forming in my stomach. What on earth could he have to say that is making him this anxious?

For once, his usual smirk fades, and I feel the air between us change. My heart races as I wait for him to speak. I can’t stand the suspense any longer.

“Just spit it out,” I say with a hint of impatience. He looks away for a moment before meeting my eyes again.

His expression is unreadable. “Actually, me and my roommates were planning to go to the beach.” He pauses as his eyes roam my face. “I thought maybe you could come too.”

I blink, still processing his words. His facade of seriousness is gone, and he laughs freely. I glare at him, crossing my arms. “You’re insane,” I declare.

He just grins back at me. “Well, what can I say? You bring out the best in me.” I sigh and shake my head at his carefree attitude. But secretly, I can’t help but feel a little endeared by his antics.

“What will I do with you guys? Besides, I don’t even know any of your friends,” I say carefully.

He shrugs nonchalantly. “You know me.”

“Yeah, and that’s the scariest part,” I retort with a laugh, although internally I want to jump at this chance to spend more time with him because it seems to be the highlight of my day.

He feigns hurt and clutches his chest. “Wow. Way to break my heart. How about you bring your friends along?” he suggests.

I arch an eyebrow at him. “But why do you want me there anyways?” I ask, genuinely curious. He looks down at the table for a moment, and I catch a hint of something in his eyes that I cannot decipher. But then he looks up at me, his usual cheeky smile back on his face.

“Do you remember the party?” he asks and I nod. “You said you wanted to get out of your comfort zone?” I try to hold back a smile, feeling giddy knowing he remembers such vivid details of our conversation. He rubs his nape, as if unsure of what he’s saying. “I just thought parties may not be your scene because there are too many people and it’s always wild, but maybe,” He pauses, staring into my eyes, his green ones twinkling. “Maybe you could enjoy around people you know.” I feel my heart skip a beat at his words.

I look at this guy I initially thought to be careless, simply annoying. And yet here he is, thinking about my comfort and my wishes. I slowly sip on my coffee to swallow the lump in my throat. I don’t think anyone has ever done that for me—well, except my family, but they have to. He doesn’t, but he still thought about me.

“It’s...” I fumble. “It’s really thoughtful of you to think like that,” I say, trying to sound casual. He grins playfully, leaning closer across the table.

“Well, what can I say? I’m full of surprises.”

I roll my eyes, unable to hide the smile creeping onto my lips. “Surprises and trouble, I presume?”

He chuckles, his eyes lighting up with amusement. “Hey now, I prefer the term ‘spontaneous fun provider.’”

I shake my head, feigning exasperation. “Spontaneous troublemaker, more like.”

He raises an eyebrow, pretending to be offended. “Ouch, right in the heart. You wound me.”

I laugh softly, feeling a warmth spreading through me despite my attempts to stay composed. “You’ll live.”

Leaning back in his chair, he eyes me intently. I shiver slightly under his intense gaze. “So, are you in or not?”

I take a deep breath, the weight of his question on my shoulders. What’s the harm in it, right? If I don’t like it there, I will still have Soph and Siya with me. We can come back whenever we want to. Plus, he’s right. If I want to break free, I need to do something about it rather than just overthink it. But there’s a part of me that’s still hesitant, my heart pounding in my chest, torn between saying yes and continuing to play it safe. I look at him carefully, studying his face for any indication of what he’s thinking.

He leans forward, resting his elbows on the table, his eyes never leaving mine. I can sense that he’s anticipating my answer, and the weight of his gaze intensifies the pressure I feel. The silence between us stretches taut, only the soft hum of conversation around us breaking the tension. He seems to be waiting patiently, his patience only fueling my hesitation.

Finally, I take a deep breath. This is not a life-or-death decision; I can do it. “Alright, I’m in.” The words come out softer than I intended.

“You’re in?” Daniel’s eyes widen with surprise but also with a hint of excitement. He didn’t expect me to agree so quickly. He grins, his entire face lighting up.

“Good. I’m glad,” he says, relief audible in his voice. “It’ll be fun, I promise.”

I pick up my backpack, wanting to talk about this with Soph and Siya as soon as possible. “You text me the details, okay?”

Daniel nods, looking slightly taken aback by my haste. “I will. I will,” he says, as I get up to leave. I give him a final smile, and he grins back brashly.

“Have a good day, firecracker.” He watches me leave, and I feel his gaze on my back as I turn around. My cheeks heat up slightly, but I push the feeling down, reminding myself that this is not a big deal. It’s just a day at the beach with some friends.

No biggie. Right?

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DANIEL

“Yes, Dad,” I answer, my voice tight, as I close the door to my bedroom behind me.

“How are you, son?” He coughs. I feel guilt rising in my chest for not visiting him, but I shake my head; it doesn’t matter.

“I am fine. You?” I ask a little gently.

He laughs painfully. I wince, guilt gnawing at me despite my efforts to push it away. I know my father’s condition is deteriorating, but acknowledging it over the phone makes it seem even more real, more immediate. He was diagnosed with stage 1A lung cancer when I was just about to begin university. I cried that night like I cried when I lost my mother because to think of a world without Dad is just unbearable and so painful. He changed after his diagnosis. He always used to be on my side, but now, it seems that we are on two different sides of our very small world.

“What do you think?” My father’s voice cuts through the silence, his tone a mixture of bitter humor and resignation. I swallowed hard, trying to find the right words.

“Did the doctors say anything?” I ask, my voice hoarse. The question physically hurts to ask, but I need to know. I need to know how long I have left with him. A heavy silence hangs on the other end of the line. It feels like an eternity before my father’s voice pierces through it.

“They say...” He pauses, his voice strained. I can almost hear the crack in it, the fear hiding behind his words. “Two years, son. Maximum.”

I sigh. I love my father very much. He has always been my inspiration, my support system. Growing up without a mother, people thought I would turn out to be a selfish bastard, but he gave me all the affection. And when I needed it, he scolded me too. He always made sure I didn't miss mom.

"Dad..." My voice cracks a little despite my best efforts to hold myself together.

"No, Daniel, there's no need to worry, but please, for my sake." He pauses. I know where he is heading with this. "Please, Daniel." He wants me to quit basketball.

He was the one who introduced it to me. "Dad." My voice falters, caught between anger and understanding. I can feel my heart clenching as he continues speaking, his voice pleading. He knows how much basketball means to me. It's not just my passion; it's my outlet, my way to destress. I run a hand through my hair.

"Dad, you know that's not fair. You know how much I need it. You're the one that made me fall in love with basketball," I say, a hint of desperation creeping into my voice. Every word feels like a knife digging into my chest. My hands tremble as I hold the phone, staring blankly at the wall.

"I know." He coughs. "I know, but it doesn't guarantee money. Only if you succeed will you be able to survive in that game." I clench my fists, torn between the guilt of not being able to ease Dad's worries and the determination to pursue my own passion. My mind races with conflicting thoughts—memories of Dad cheering me on at games, the sacrifices he had made to support me, and now this painful request to give up the very thing that brings me solace.

"It's a very dicey career, Daniel. One mistake and you will be benched for life," he says. He sounds bitter. My stomach churns at the thought of quitting basketball.

He was a new player in the NBA and had dreams of making it big in basketball, but

those dreams crashed before they could even begin. He was accused of tampering with the ball to gain an advantage. The truth was, it was a freak accident, but the damage was done. He was never given a chance again. I was there. I saw him wallow in self-pity. It was my mother who pulled him up while managing me and her illness. He still blames himself for not being there for Mom, but I understand because I can imagine how it must feel. It's exactly how I am feeling right now. Just the thought of giving up is so scary. He wants me to manage his company, his business, because it's a safer option.

I know about his failures and his disappointment, and I understand it on a deeply personal level. My heart aches as I realize how much he wants to protect me from that same fate, but giving up my dreams doesn't feel like an option. I can't give up without trying. It's like he's forgotten he did not raise a quitter.

"Dad, I understand your concerns. I really do," I say, keeping my tone soft but firm. "But basketball isn't just a game to me. It's a part of who I am. And no amount of money or security can replace that."

He sighs. "I know that feeling—the thrill of the game, the rush of competing. But I also know the harsh realities." He chuckles humorlessly. "I wish I kept you away from that game," he whispers.

I can feel my heart break at his words. "Dad," I say, my voice thick with emotion. "I don't regret anything, and I wouldn't trade those moments on the court for the world. It defined me. "

"Are you attending the business classes?" he asks, changing the topic because he knows I am not going to give in. My thoughts go back to Anya; she's the sole reason I want to be in that class.

"Yes, I am," I reply. "I don't like it, Dad. I don't have the mind of a businessman."

Dad coughs again, his breath labored. He sounds so frail and tired, a hospital monitor beeping in the background.

“Daniel,” he says weakly. “I know you’re passionate about basketball. But listen to me. Please.” I hate the pain in his voice as much as I hate his words.

“I will prove you wrong,” I whisper. “There’s a tournament,” I begin with hope. “If I perform well, I could get scouted, Dad.” There is a pause, and then I hear him exhale softly. “I will come meet you after that tournament,” I reply firmly.

“You’re too determined. Just like your mom,” he says, his voice filled with a mix of affection and resignation. “Okay.” Dad coughs. “I look forward to seeing you, son.” There’s a brief silence on the phone.

“Take care of yourself, Dad. And please tell your bodyguards to stop spying on me,” I request.

He chuckles. “You noticed?”

“They’re not very discreet about it.” I sigh.

“Fine, I just wanted to make sure you’re going to your classes,” he reasons. “I will pull them back.” He coughs. “Don’t worry,” he adds.

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ANYA

I look at Daniel. He has a hint of a smile on his face. “Thank you for providing a cab service, captain,” I say.

“Hey, anything for you, Firecracker,” he replies jokingly, his eyes glimmering with amusement. I can’t help but roll my eyes at his response.

I feel a nudge from the backseat. “Ow.” I wince, glaring at Soph. She’s smirking. She looks between me and Daniel. Oh god, she’s not going to leave this alone. Siya has an amused smile on her face as well. I roll my eyes at them, but I can feel a blush creeping into my cheeks. I try to keep my expression neutral so as not to feed into their assumptions. I turn my attention to the road before Daniel catches our interaction.

“Here we are, ladies!” Daniel announces as the engine comes to a stop. Soph and Siya get out of the back seat, gathering their stuff. He looks at me for a moment longer than he should. My heart skips a beat under his intense gaze, and the air between us suddenly feels charged. But before I can react or say anything, he looks away, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips.

“Come on, Firecracker. Let’s have fun,” he says, his voice a touch quieter than usual. I take a deep breath, trying to suppress the fluttering in my stomach. I nod, smiling softly. I get out of the car, walking around and standing beside Siya. I can hear the peaceful sound of waves crashing on the shore. I look at Soph, already running towards the beach, and I snicker. I take the bag we brought from Siya, but immediately, Daniel takes it from me. “I will take it.”

“Hey, you can’t carry everything.” I protest weakly. He pauses for a moment, pretending to think.

“You’re right,” he says. He puts the bag down and takes off his sunglasses. He extends his hand. I tilt my head in confusion but still take it from him. “Here, You can carry this,” he says, grinning slightly, and before I can utter another word, he walks away. My heart stutters.

I huff in annoyance. Internally, I am swooning. Only a little bit, though.

Siya snickers. “You like him,” she whispers.

My eyes widen. “Pfft, no. Not at all. I mean, I do like him.” I clear my throat. “But not in that way. I mean, I have taste.” I try to sound dismissive, but the way my face heats up will surely betray me. I flip my hair, trying to seem composed when I’m anything but.

She giggles. “Sure. If you say so.” I roll my eyes.

“Come on! Why are you guys walking like turtles?” Soph exclaims. “Move those damn legs.” I chuckle, pulling Siya with me. We run onto the beach, the sound of the waves crashing against the shore, the salty sea air, filling the air. I can feel Daniel’s eyes on me, but I don’t have the courage to face him right now. He comes and stands near me. I see three guys walking towards us. They must be his friends.

“Dude, I thought you pranked us or something,” a guy nearly as tall as Daniel says. Daniel puts our bag down.

“Ah! I understand. You must be distracted by these hot ladies.” Another one pipes up. His gaze lingers on Soph a while longer than it should. I roll my eyes .

“I apologize on behalf of my friends,” Daniel says, glaring at them.

“Girls, this is Louis. He’s also on my team.” Louis flashes us a charming grin and runs a hand through his messy brown hair.

“This is Ethan.” Ethan is the middle guy among the three, shorter than Daniel and Louis. He has messy dark hair and a shy smile.

“Hi, nice to meet you.” His voice is softer and gentler, a stark contrast to the playful tones of his friends. He seems more reserved and introverted.

“And that’s Caleb. Just stay away from him, for your sake.” He sighs while Caleb chuckles.

“You can try. You won’t succeed, though.” Caleb winks at me, inspiring another eye roll from me.

“And this is Siya, Sophia, and—” He looks at me. Our eyes meet. “Anya.” He inhales sharply.

“Oh, so this is the world-famous Anya,” Louis comments. I try to keep my cool, his words clearly indicating he’s talked about me to his friends. Good or bad, I don’t know, but at least I crossed his mind. Daniel breaks our eye contact as he narrows his eyes at Louis who grins sheepishly.

As the afternoon sun begins to dip lower, casting a golden hue over the beach, the atmosphere becomes more relaxed and playful. A cold breeze makes me shiver. I wrap my arms around myself. Louis, Ethan, and Caleb join our group seamlessly, their easy banter blending with our laughter as we share stories, enjoying the beach. Soph’s laughter rings out as she runs toward the water, shedding her clothes until she’s in her swimsuit, ready to dive in. I quickly change into my swimsuit too, but I

take a seat beside Siya, who's now engrossed in a novel. It's cold; the beach is not for winter. Damn, I really hope I do not catch a cold. I hate it.

My eyes wander around the beach, searching for Daniel. My breath hitches in my throat when I find him. He's shirtless, playing volleyball with a bunch of people. He looks ridiculously good with the ocean breeze tousling his hair. I can't help but bite my lip as I observe Daniel's every movement, his muscular torso, and his strong arms.

"Stop ogling." I jerk my head towards Siya, feeling flustered that she caught me staring.

I cough. "I am not."

Siya smirks. "Don't lie to me, at least. I have known you since we could barely talk," she says. I sigh, unable to come up with a reply. She's right. I can't hide anything from her; she can read me too easily.

She puts a hand on my shoulder. I look at her, reluctant to take my eyes off of Daniel, but I force myself to do just that. "It's okay if you like him, Anya," she says, her voice gentle.

"Anya!" I turn my head towards the voice, my heart racing in my chest. Daniel is walking toward us, his body glistening with sweat from the intense game of volleyball, still clutching the ball in his hands. He looks effortlessly handsome with the sun setting behind him.

"Hey," he greets us, a warm smile on his face. "You two are not joining us?"

Siya smiles at him. "I was just about to join Soph. She seems to be having fun in the water." She gets up, keeping her book on the blanket. She gives us one last look and

walks toward Sophia.

“I am just enjoying the sunset,” I say quietly, still lost in Siya’s words. He observes me for a moment and then sits beside me, throwing the ball to Caleb. Plopping down next to me on the sand, his presence sending a shiver down my spine, he leans back, propping himself up with his arms. The muscles on his biceps flexing slightly under the strain and I find myself quickly averting my gaze.

“You look incredible,” he says, his eyes lingering on me for a moment longer than usual. The way he says it makes my heartbeat stumble, and I feel a warmth rise to my cheeks. There’s something different in his tone, like he means it more than just surface-level. I can’t help but notice how his arms flex as he supports himself.

“Thanks,” I murmur, finally breaking the silence. “You don’t look so bad yourself.” He grins lazily.

“I know, Firecracker. You seemed to have a hard time keeping your eyes off me.” He smirks.

My heart rate spikes when he nudges me playfully. I scoff, folding my arms to show my annoyance. “I was not,” I start, fumbling over my words. “It’s just—it’s...” I trail off, exhaling in frustration. “The game seemed interesting,” I finally mutter.

He smiles at me softly, and his dimple catches my attention. Butterflies flutter in my stomach, and I try to push the feeling away.

His finger brushes against mine. A jolt of electricity shoots through me, and I quickly try to ignore it, pretending to be unaffected. But then, he takes my hand. His fingers trace light patterns on the back, sending warmth flooding through me, making my heart race.

I want to pull my hand away. I should. This is ridiculous. I don't have time for distractions. I'm not interested in him like that. My focus has always been on my career. But my hand remains in his, and my breath catches. It feels too natural, too right.

Against my better judgment, I lean a little closer. My nonchalant facade is beginning to crack.

"Did you know what my life motto is?" I blurt out, desperately trying to distract myself from the way his presence is making everything feel so... off-balance.

He looks at me, startled at first, but quickly recovers, still holding my hand. "Please enlighten me, Ms. Anya," he says with a smirk.

"Keep your head held high and your middle finger higher," I reply, trying to inject some confidence into my voice.

Daniel stares at me for a beat, clearly taken off-guard, but then a wide grin spreads across his face. His eyes sparkle with amusement.

"That's quite the life philosophy, Firecracker." He laughs, a deep, rumbling sound that sends a shiver down my spine. "It suits you, though."

I grin at his reaction, but my mind is still elsewhere. The warm golden light of the setting sun, the sound of the waves crashing in the background—it all feels too perfect, too intimate. I shake my head, trying to shake off the feeling. He's just someone I'm working with, right? So why can't I pull my hand away? Why does it feel like this is exactly where I should be?

I look up at him, my heart thumping in my chest. What is this? What is he doing to me?

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DANIEL

I look at her. She's lost in her thoughts. I watch her as the setting sun casts a warm, golden glow on her face, her hair gently ruffled by the soft ocean breeze. The light bathes her in its soft, warm, amber hue. Her body is revealed in a green bikini that highlights her curves perfectly, and it's hard not to notice how beautiful she looks. I need to see that smile of hers; it seems like it's becoming my favorite thing to see. "I have an idea," I say slowly. She looks at me intensely. "Let's make sandcastles."

She blinks at me for a moment then laughs. "What?" Her surprise at my suggestion is endearing, her laughter filling the air with a sweet melody that's as captivating as her smile. Her eyebrows quirk in surprise as she looks at me, her eyes filled with skepticism and amusement.

"Sandcastles?" she echoes, a hint of disbelief in her voice. "Are you for real?"

I can't help but chuckle at her bewildered expression, her reaction fueling the spark of mischief within me. "Yes. Actually, let's compete." I smile smugly.

Her surprise quickly morphs into a smirk, her laughter fading into a challenging glare. I press my lips together to stifle the laughter bubbling in me, loving the way she rises to my bait, the competitive spirit flaring within her.

"And what will I get if I win?" She faces me, intrigued by my proposal.

I chuckle devilishly. "First of all, you're not going to win." I correct her. She scoffs. "And secondly, good question." She rolls her eyes, laughing slightly.

“How about I do anything you want me to do if you win?” I suggest. “And if I win,” I whisper as I shift closer to her, squeezing her hand. She gasps softly, her lips parting. “If I win,” I repeat, my voice low and sultry. I lean in to whisper in her ear, a slight shiver coursing through her body at my proximity. “I will throw you into the water.” I smirk. She turns bright red at my words, her eyes widening with shock. Her hands fly up to my chest, pushing me away half-heartedly.

“You wouldn’t dare,” she accuses, but there’s a hint of excitement behind her feigned annoyance.

“Come on. You are at a beach, with no water or sand on your body. It’s unfortunate.”

She shoots me a glare, her hands on her hips, though I can see the hint of a smile on her face. “You’re going to regret it,” she threatens.

“Oh, really?” I say, raising an eyebrow, enjoying the way she gets riled up. “I’d like to see you try and defeat me.”

With that, she huffs, turns on her heel, and stomps off. I can’t help but chuckle as I watch her walk away, her hips swaying tantalizingly.

“What? Are you going to just stand there and stare at me?” she exclaims. I get up and follow her, my eyes still admiring her figure as she stops near the water’s edge.

“Are you ready to lose?” I tease her, coming up behind her. She turns around, her eyes sparkling with determination. She scoffs, sticking up her middle finger at me. “Looks like someone’s feeling confident,” I say, still smiling. “You’re feisty.”

She crosses her arms over her chest defiantly, sticking out her tongue at me. I laugh, thoroughly entertained by her brattiness. I’m about to reply when she suddenly bends down to start gathering sand.

My eyes immediately drop to her behind, her body straining slightly as she scoops up the sand. I feel my mouth go dry, my thoughts getting distracted. I quickly shake my head. I might like her, but I happen to be quite competitive myself. I have to win. Plus, think of the reward. I smirk as I bend down to start working on my own creation.

But it's difficult to concentrate. The sight of her working on her sandcastle in that adorable little bikini is torture. As I build my castle, I glance over at her every few moments, admiring her focused expression and appreciating the view of her from behind.

Her tongue sticking out in concentration, her arms reaching out and digging in the sand, her legs bent in an enticing manner—I won't be surprised if I lose because it's impossible to focus.

I scoop up wet sand, pressing it firmly as I shape the base of my castle. My focus wavers when I glance at Anya. She's crouched over her creation, her brows furrowed in deep concentration. Her hands move quickly, smoothing the walls and perfecting every tiny detail, like the fate of the world depends on this sandcastle. When she looks up, her eyes lock with mine, fierce and challenging. "Don't just sit there slacking," she says, her tone sharper than it should be for something so trivial. I grin, but her intensity pulls me in. Maybe I should take this seriously too.

A few moments later, she jumps up. "I am done! I am done!" she exclaims. Her exclamation draws me out of my distracted state, and I lift my head to see her standing, hands on her hips, looking pleased with her work. I raise an eyebrow and straighten up, moving to stand next to her.

My eyes rake over her creation, and I stare at her. "Is that it?" I ask, truly confused. She tilts her head, puzzled by my question, and her eyes land on my work. She gasps. Her mouth opens and then closes, and she eyes me warily.

“You haven’t finished it yet, so I win.” She shrugs.

I chuckle. “The competition never had a time limit, sweetheart.” My smug tone makes her eyes snap up to mine, her mouth curving into a pout, frustration written all over her face. “My castle is still only halfway done and I am already winning.” I can’t help but chuckle at her reaction, finding her pouty expression adorable.

“Don’t worry. You put up a good fight.”

Her eyes narrow at my words, realizing the hidden mockery in them. “First of all, you don’t get to decide who wins.” She pokes my chest. “You will obviously say you won.” She huffs and gazes around on the beach and smiles slyly. “Let’s ask Siya.” She smirks.

A smug smile tugs on my lips, too. “Fine.” I intentionally graze her arm with mine. “Let’s do that, Firecracker,” I whisper. “But I must say, you’re a sore loser, Anya,” I murmur in her ear.

Her body tenses at my touch, the tips of her ears turning pink. “I’ll have you know, I don’t lose. And I’m not about to start now,” she whispers.

“I don’t know about other things—” I stand up straight. “---but you do lose your temper pretty quickly,” I add in a hushed tone. She stares at me, her face redden, as she folds her arms, pushing her breasts together. My eyes linger on her chest a little longer than they should. I clear my throat. I don’t think it’s humanly possible for anyone to be as red as Anya is right now. I am genuinely concerned now.

She looks away, suddenly waving at Siya. My eyes remain fixed on her. “Come here!” she mouths. Siya comes walking forward. She looks at Anya then sees the sand castles and grins. “Whose castle is better?” Anya asks. There’s an edge in her voice, and I know she’s trying to cheat, but I let her. I think I would let her get away

with anything.

I see Siya's struggling expression. She definitely knows mine is better, but her best friend is against me. She suppresses a grin. "Anya, I am so sorry." She sighs. "I can't lie so blatantly."

Anya gasps and I chuckle. "Oh no, Siya. You just made your life worse." Siya's words hang in the air and Anya's eyes widen further, her mouth agape at the betrayal. She looks between Siya and me, disbelief written all over her face.

I struggle to contain my laughter, finding the situation more entertaining than I should.

"You see, Anya, sometimes the truth can be tough," I say, trying to sound sympathetic but unable to conceal the teasing lilt in my voice.

As I continue to look at Anya, her expression shifting from shock to annoyance, I can't help but revel in the moment. She's struggling to find a comeback, her frustration growing. She huffs, her cheeks flushing, and turns her gaze back to me, fixing me with a glare.

"That's not fair," she finally says, her voice laced with a mixture of anger and embarrassment. "You guys are being biased!"

"You can always ask for another opinion," Siya suggests slowly.

Anya looks at her. "There's no need for that." She pouts. "Fine, I lose." She looks at me through her hair.

I raise an eyebrow, a mixture of surprise and satisfaction on my face. "Are you admitting defeat, Firecracker?" I wasn't expecting her to accept defeat so easily, and

the sight of her scowling is too adorable to handle.

She nods slowly. “You’re the witness, Siya. You can’t go back on your words now, Anya.” I chuckle evilly.

“It’s not my fault. I grew up in Delhi. There weren’t many beaches around.” She rolls her eyes.

“Excuses won’t work now, Firecracker.” I tease, my voice low and laced with amusement. “You lost fair and square. Admit it.”

I close the gap between us, standing directly in front of her, forcing her to look up at me now. I love the difference in height, towering over her petite frame, a little power game we often play. Her eyes stay fixed on mine, still defiant, but there’s a hint of wariness in them too.

“So, you admit I won?” My voice is low, almost a whisper. Siya coughs and Anya pushes me away. Her breathing quickens she looks away, nodding. I can’t help but marvel at Anya’s pouting expression, her cheeks flushed in frustrated defeat. The real prize here is the sight of her, so adorably flustered.

“I won. Now, I get to claim my prize,” I remind her, a sly grin tugging at the corners of my mouth. “Ready for it?”

“I will just submerge myself in the water. Happy?” She groans.

I laugh. “Where’s the fun in that?” I feign innocence. “How about I do the honors?” She rolls her eyes, but I see a small smile finally tugging on her lips.

“So water we waiting for!” I exclaim.

Siya chuckles while Anya just blinks at me repeatedly. “Are you serious?” She pulls a face.

“Damn serious!” I grin widely.

“Lord, give me patience or—” She glares at me. “---an untraceable handgun.” I am always amused at how easily she drops these murderous comments in the middle of a conversation while looking so fucking tiny and adorable.

I don’t give her much time to taunt me anymore. I pick her up bridal-style. She squeals. “What are you doing?” she exclaims, her voice laced with a mixture of surprise and feigned annoyance. She grabs onto my shoulders for support. I love the way she feels in my arms—so light and dainty .

Her hands tighten their grip on my shoulders, her slender fingers pressing into my muscular arms, and I can feel her body tense up slightly as I lift her effortlessly. For someone who acts so tough and assertive, she sure is easy to fluster.

“Don’t worry, Firecracker. I’ve got you.” I reassure her with a smug smile, enjoying the way her eyes widen and her ears turn red. Her warmth radiates through her bikini against my chest, and I can’t help but notice the faint scent of coconut and sunscreen that clings to her skin. It’s intoxicating, drawing me in closer despite the playful banter.

As we approach the edge of the water, she clings to me tighter, her fingers digging into my shoulders. “Daniel, I swear if you drop me, I will never forgive you,” she threatens, her voice a mix of amusement and genuine concern.

“You have my word, firecracker.” I assure her with a mischievous grin. “I won’t let anything happen to you.” With a swift movement, I step into the shallow surf, the cool water lapping at our feet. Anya lets out a squeal, her grip on me tightening even

more as she instinctively leans back, away from the water. Her eyes widen, panic flickering across her face, and I can't help but laugh at her adorable reaction.

"Relax, it's just water," I tease, pretending to lose my balance just to see her reaction. She squeaks and tightens her grip, her body pressing closer to mine, her eyes locked onto mine with a mix of anxiousness and slight fear.

I take another step, the water now up to my knees, and I can feel her tense up even more. "Daniel, seriously," she pleads, her voice now tinged with a hint of desperation. "I'm warning you."

But I ignore her protests, enjoying the playful dance between us. With a quick, fluid motion, I lower her closer to the water's surface, the cool waves lapping gently against her feet. Anya lets out a startled gasp, her eyes wide as she realizes she's now just inches away from the water .

"See, that wasn't so bad, was it?" I tease, my voice low and playful. She glares at me, but the corners of her lips twitch upwards in a reluctant smile.

"You're impossible," she mutters, her cheeks flushing with a mix of embarrassment and amusement.

I hold her steady, the water swirling around our legs, and for a moment, we just stand there, her gaze locked with mine. The playful banter fades into a comfortable silence, the sound of the waves crashing against the shore filling the air around us.

"You're not mad, are you?" I ask softly, my tone sincere now. Anya shakes her head, a small smile playing on her lips.

"No, I'm not mad," she admits, her voice softening.

“Good,” I reply, relieved that she’s not truly upset with me. “Because I did promise to throw you into the water.”

She rolls her eyes, but I can see the spark of amusement in them. “Yeah, yeah,” she grumbles half-heartedly. “You win this round, Daniel.”

I chuckle, feeling victorious in more ways than one. Holding her close and feeling the rhythm of her breathing against my chest, I realize just how much I enjoy spending time with her. She might be my favorite part of the day. I smile gently at her as she splashes some water at me, laughing. It’s so beautiful to see her so carefree.

I can’t help but grin like an idiot. She’s radiant in this moment, her carefree spirit contagious. Her eyes sparkle with mischief as she scoops up more water, aiming another playful splash in my direction. I smile smugly. “Oh, I am not letting that pass, Anya!” I exclaim. “Oh, it’s on firecracker.” I laugh evilly, my heart still racing looking at her smile.

You’re just so beautiful, Anya. Do you have any idea how much you affect me?

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DANIEL

I lace up my sneakers, the faint smell of polish and sweat grounding me. I have always loved the gym, probably my favorite place to be. The fluorescent lights overhead cast a familiar glow in the gym, and the sound of the basketball bouncing on the hardwood is like a heartbeat, steady and alive.

“Alright, team, bring it in!” I call out, clapping my hands.

Ethan jogs over, smirking. “What’s the pep talk today, Captain Sunshine?”

I shake my head but can’t help the grin tugging at my lips. “Pep talk’s simple: don’t let Ethan shoot.”

The team erupts in laughter, and Ethan throws a towel at me. “Funny, Danny. Real funny.”

Louis rolls his eyes. “Can we start already? Some of us have lives outside of basketball.”

“Yeah? Like what, Louis?” Caleb retorts. “Playing video games and eating chips?”

“Enough,” I say, stepping into the center of the group. My voice is calm but firm, and they quiet down. “Focus up. Let’s make this count.”

We break into two teams, red jerseys versus blue. I’m on blue with Ethan, Caleb, and a couple of sophomores we’re grooming for the starting lineup. Louis, of course, is

on red—his preferred role as my rival.

The ball is tossed up for the tip-off, and Louis leaps higher, slapping it to his team.

The ball sails toward Louis's team, and their point guard snatches it, darting down the court with quick, calculated steps.

"Get on him!" I shout, sprinting back to defend.

Louis trails behind the guard, looking for an opening. I stick close to him, cutting off his angles. The guard tries to drive into the paint, but Caleb steps up, hands high, forcing a pass.

Ethan intercepts, and we're off.

"Go, go, go!" I yell, running alongside him.

Ethan dribbles with precision, dodging a defender before passing to me near the three-point line. I glance at the rim and see Louis closing in fast.

No time to second-guess.

I pump fake, and Louis takes the bait, lunging forward. I sidestep and launch the shot. The ball arcs perfectly, the net barely moving as it swishes through.

"Boom!" I shout, turning to slap Ethan's hand.

"Lucky shot," Louis mutters, jogging back with a scowl.

"Skill, buddy. You should try it sometime," I quip, earning laughs from the blue team. Louis's team executes a clean pick-and-roll and he breaks free for a layup.

“Not bad,” I admit as he jogs past me.

“Better than you,” he shoots back, grinning.

We go back and forth, the score climbing steadily. The gym is alive with the sound of sneakers squeaking, the thud of the ball, and the occasional shout from a teammate.

“Switch on defense!” I call as Louis’s team sets a screen. Caleb adjusts quickly, staying on his man while I take on the shooter.

The red team’s guard attempts a deep three, but it bounces off the rim. Ethan grabs the rebound and immediately outlets to me .

“Run it!”

I sprint down the court, the ball bouncing in rhythm with my strides. A red jersey appears in my peripheral vision—Louis, of course. He’s fast, but I’m faster. I fake left, driving hard to the right, and hear his frustrated grunt as he tries to recover. Near the basket, I spot Caleb trailing behind me.

Without hesitation, I dish the ball to him, and he slams it home with authority. The gym erupts in cheers, the echo of the dunk reverberating in my chest.

“Teamwork makes the dream work!” Caleb shouts, grinning wide.

“Good finish!” I say, clapping him on the back.

With only a couple of minutes left on the clock, the score is tied. Both teams are drenched in sweat, breaths coming hard and fast, but no one’s giving up. Louis calls for the ball, his eyes locked on mine.

“Think you can stop me?” he asks, bouncing the ball lazily.

“I don’t think. I know,” I reply, crouching into a defensive stance.

He smirks and starts his drive. I stay with him, my feet moving instinctively. He spins, looking for an opening, but I anticipate it and block his path.

“Not today,” I say, swiping at the ball.

It’s loose for a split second before Caleb scoops it up. He passes it to Ethan, who sprints down the court.

“Finish strong!” I shout, trailing behind.

Ethan pulls up just beyond the three-point line, the defender a step too late. The ball leaves his hands, the buzzer sounding just as it arcs through the air.

Time seems to slow as everyone watches. The ball hits the rim, bounces once, twice, and finally drops through the net. The blue team erupts in cheers, and Ethan is mobbed by teammates. I grab him in a headlock, laughing.

“Clutch shot, man!” I say, shaking him playfully.

“You doubted me?” he teases, grinning ear to ear .

“Good game, guys,” I say, clapping Louis on the back as he scowls. “And Louis, better luck next time.”

“Don’t get used to it, Danny,” he replies, but his grin gives him away.

I laugh, heading to the bench to grab my water bottle. The court may just be a gym to

some, but to me, it's home.

???

ANYA

I am contemplating whether I should text him or not. I mean, there's no real requirement of me rushing this assignment because there's too much time left for the submission; it's just that I haven't seen him in days. And I can't believe it. It's quite embarrassing to admit that I might like his company more than I wish to. I don't want to sound desperate, but maybe I am?

The words in the message linger on the screen, the cursor blinking patiently as if waiting for me to continue typing. I lean back in my chair, feeling a mix of anticipation and anxiety. But I need to ask him something related to the project, right? That's the only reason I should contact him.

"Ah, screw it," I mutter under my breath, and I hit 'send'.

Let's meet to discuss the assignment today. I need a good excuse to leave my pile of unfinished Netflix shows.

I wait for what feels like an eternity, watching the screen for any sign of a reply. Just as I start thinking about how eager and desperate I might look, my phone buzzes with a response.

Daniel:

So you want me to be your excuse?

I'll take that as a compliment.

I can't help but roll my eyes at his cocky response. Typical Daniel, always having a witty remark ready. But secretly, I feel a little flutter of excitement at the thought of seeing him again.

Daniel:

Sure.

I am sorry I am asking you to do this, but can we meet
at my place? I am too tired from the practice to even move.

My eyebrows furrow in concern.

Are you sure you want to do this?

We can do it later. You can rest.

His response comes almost instantly.

Daniel:

What? You're worried about me now?

Trust me, I can handle a little studying.

Besides, it's just one assignment, not the end of the world.

Of course, I know he's smirking without even seeing him.

Don't get too ahead of yourself, captain. I just don't want you to sleep on me during

this study session. What time?

I hit send and immediately, start pacing around my room. It's not like me to be so jittery about these things, but then again, it's Daniel. Pfft, I don't like him or anything. I just think he's very beautiful and extremely kissable. What the hell? I am about to go to his place for a study session, and what indecent thoughts am I having. Great work, Anya. I roll my eyes at myself.

Daniel:

How about 7 PM? I'll text you my address.

I quickly type back.

Perfect. See you then!

Daniel:

Looking forward to it.

I toss my phone onto the bed. But before my nerves can kick in, my phone rings. It's Ma. Immediately I pick up the call, her face brightening the screen as she smiles widely at me. "Hello, beautifullest mother!" I greet her.

She rolls her eyes. "That's not even a word." She chuckles. "I have sent you snacks. It might arrive in a day or two." Ma's obsession with feeding me is hilariously outrageous. I weigh fifty-four kgs, which isn't enough in my mother's opinion. She thinks I am malnourished and will starve myself to death if it wasn't for her.

"Haa , Ma," I reply in disbelief.

“What’re you doing?” she asks.

“Nothing at all,” I reply too quickly. God, why am I so easy to read? “I am meeting a guy,” I say finally. “But only for an assignment, so don’t start scolding me.”

She observes me for a second. “Why would I scold you? You’re twenty-three. I am okay with a foreigner as my son-in-law. Your father might have a heart attack, but I will handle him.” She scoffs.

I gasp. “Ma, I literally just said that it’s just for a project.” I feel heat rise on my neck.

“Sure, if you say so.” Ma winks at me. What kind of mother is she? She’s supposed to be against me spending time with a man, especially one as hot as Daniel. Nope, I did not just call him hot.

“How’s Arnav?” she asks.

“I would not know. I haven’t seen your son in days. Besides, he’s too grumpy.” I huff.

“He’s just shy,” Ma says, and I can’t help but snicker.

“You see him through rose-tinted glass, that’s why.” She narrows her eyes at me, and I smile sheepishly.

“How are Siya and Sophia?”

I smile. “As usual, Soph is up to no good and Siya is doing good.” My eyes land on the digital clock on my bedside table, widening with realization. “Ma, I am late!” I exclaim.

“Fine, fine, go ahead. Have fun on your study date.” She chuckles.

“It’s not a date!”

“Of course, it’s not a date,” she replies, her voice laced with a knowing tone. “Just two friends working hard on a project, right?”

She knows more than you think. Mothers always do, and her teasing tone is a hint of her understanding. “Bye!” I exclaim, ending the call. Only half an hour left. I need to leave now.

I quickly freshen up, spraying a bit of perfume and fluffing my hair. I opt for a simple pair of black leggings and a loose sweatshirt, but I also add a scarf because I don’t want to catch a cold. I grab my bag and head out, my nerves a jumble of excitement and nervousness.

I manage to catch a cab to Daniel’s place, my thoughts racing the entire way there. The sky is darkening as evening sets in. The cityscape flashes by as the cab weaves through the traffic. I check my phone; it’s nearly seven. Finally, the taxi comes to a stop at the address I gave the driver. I look at the high-rise apartment building in front of me. This is it.

I adjust my scarf around my neck, feeling the fabric flutter gently against my skin. The cool evening breeze carries a gust of freshness, and I smile in response.

With a final look at the surroundings, I begin making my way towards the entrance, my footsteps echoing softly on the pavement. The entrance to the apartment complex is grand, with marble flooring and glass walls. Wow, he must be rich to be able to afford this.

I walk to the elevator, heart thudding inside my chest. Pressing the button, I wait for

the elevator to arrive, the silence in the building making me feel a tad bit alone. I keep fidgeting, adjusting my scarf, and playing with the straps of the bag slung over my shoulder.

The elevator swiftly arrives, and I step inside carefully. The doors close, and it begins to rise .

Suddenly, the lights flicker and the elevator jerks to a halt, leaving me in complete darkness. My heart begins to race as panic sets in, the lack of light making the small space seem even smaller. I take a step backwards, my back hitting the wall. My breathing becomes shallow, and I feel a wave of claustrophobia wash over me.

“No, no, please, this can’t be happening,” I mutter under my breath as my heart drums against my ribs. The elevator is stuck, and the darkness around me feels oppressive.

I fumble around, trying to find a way to call for help. I feel the cold metal of the emergency call button. I press it a couple of times, hoping for a response. I take off my bag, trying to search for my phone. I rummage through my belongings, desperately trying to find my phone in the darkness. I feel a sense of helplessness as my fingers fumble around, searching for the familiar shape of my device. Finally, after what feels like an eternity, my hand closes around the cool surface of my phone.

With trembling hands, I press the power button, and the screen lights up, casting a faint glow in the cramped space. I quickly unlock it and dial Daniel’s number. The phone rings a couple of times before it connects, and I hear Daniel’s voice on the other end.

“You’re late, Firecracker. I am not going to let this opportunity pass. You still have two minutes. If you don’t make it, I am going to taunt you for life.” He chuckles.

A sob escapes my mouth. “Daniel, please get me out of here,” I beg. My voice trembles, and tears sting my eyes.

“Anya? What’s wrong? Where are you?” The teasing tone in his voice disappears, leaving behind only concern. I hold the phone tighter, feeling scared in this darkness, it feels like it’s going to engulf me. “Hey, Anya, listen to me. Can you please focus on my voice? Okay, where are you? Can you tell me that?” This time he speaks softly, but urgency is evident in his voice.

“Can’t breathe.” I cry. “Elevator. Claus-claustrophobic,” I explain as much as I can.

“Hey, can you focus on my breathing and try to copy me? I am right here, Firecracker. We are in this together, okay?” I nod, trying to copy him as he instructs me. “You are doing so good, baby. I am so proud of you.” He breathes out. He sounds like he is running.

I turn on my flashlight, casting a weak beam of light around the enclosed elevator, illuminating the small space. It provides a tiny sense of comfort, driving away a hint of the dark unknown.

My breathing is still erratic and my vision starts to blur. “Daniel, I don’t know if I can do this,” I admit, my voice breaking. “I’m scared.”

“I will be there in two minutes, Firecracker. Hold on for me, please. Do you want to hear a lame joke?” he asks. Is he serious? Even in my panicked state, I can’t help but feel a flicker of warmth in my chest. His attempt to distract me with a joke is both endearing and funny.

With a shaky voice, I manage to say, “You are the joke, aren’t you?”

He chuckles softly. “You still manage to make fun of me.” I nod, even though he

can't really see me. "Which animal plays sports all the time?" he asks.

"Bat. Too easy," I answer almost immediately. With my heart still beating so damn fast, I feel a little lighter, a tad bit more comfortable than before. His stupid jokes and just listening to his voice are helping me focus on something other than the panic taking over me.

"Good, your brain is still working." He attempts humor, but I can hear the worry in his voice. "Okay, a more difficult one now. What is a turtle's favorite sport to watch on TV?"

"I have no idea," I reply in a shaky voice. "What sport does a turtle watch on TV?" I ask, trying to steady my breathing.

I can hear his rugged breathing as he shouts at someone. "Daniel?" I ask as I slide against the cold wall, sitting down on the floor.

"Hey, I am right here, Firecracker," he responds softly. I sigh in relief.

"What's the answer?" I ask, trying to distract myself.

"He's a big fan of shell-hockey," he says gently. I hum.

"Please hurry, captain," I plead, vulnerability evident in my voice. "I think I am about to pass out." My vision blurs. I just want to get out of here. I feel so stuck.

???

DANIEL

I plead with the technician. “How long is it going to take? My friend is stuck in there. She’s claustrophobic. Please be quick.” If I have to beg, I will. I’ve never felt this way before—never been this frightened for someone who isn’t even family. I just need to see her right now, touch her, feel her, and know that she’s alright.

After almost two more minutes that feel like an eternity, the elevator finally starts working. When the doors open and Anya steps out, her eyes are red and puffy, and she looks pale. She runs toward me. My heart stops. I wrap my left arm around her trembling body to support her and hold her tightly, stroking her hair with my right hand.

She’s still sobbing. “Hey, Firecracker, I’ve got you now. You’re alright, baby.” She snuggles into my neck, and even though I love everything about it, people are staring at us. I don’t think she’ll like that, so I carry her toward the staircase. I start climbing the steps, supporting her weight and steadying my own heartbeat. Each step I take seems to bring her closer to me.

When we reach my apartment door, I open it slowly. Her grip on me hasn’t loosened yet, and I find myself liking it. I place her down on the couch. At first, she’s reluctant to let me go, but after whispering sweet words and reassuring her that I’m right here, she sits down. She stares at nothing in particular, so I take her hand in mine and give it a gentle squeeze, which gets her attention.

“I was terrified.” She breathes out. “You were the only one I could think of.”

My lips part and I inhale deeply. My soul feels like it's shaking. I know this doesn't mean anything, but it feels like everything to me.

"I couldn't breathe. I felt like I was going to die, like everything was closing in on me. I wanted to peel off my skin for just a second of relief." Her words bring me back to reality. "The last time something like this happened, Arnav was there with me. It wasn't this bad then."

I see she's starting to crack again, so I squeeze her hands and rub my thumb over her palms to calm her down.

"I'll be here with you, Anya, for as long as you want me," I say. I mean it. Hell, I'll be here even if she doesn't want me.

"Please, stay with me," she whispers, sounding embarrassed.

I nod softly, my heart swelling with a mixture of relief that she's safe and an overwhelming surge of protectiveness. "I'll stay, Firecracker. I promise," I murmur, my voice barely louder than a breath. She relaxes a little at my words, leaning her head against the couch.

I know she needs some time, so I stand up. Her hand immediately catches mine, her eyes flickering with vulnerability.

"I'm just getting you a glass of water. I'll be right back." I smile softly, tightening my grip on her hand. "I promise I'll be back soon," I reassure her.

Her eyes plead with me—a mix of fear and the need to have me close—but I know she needs a moment to gather herself. She also needs to hydrate after crying and sweating so much in fear.

Reluctantly, I gently pry my hand away from hers and head to the kitchen. I grab a glass and fill it with water, my thoughts racing with worry for her. I walk back quickly, her fearful face never leaving my mind.

I offer her the glass of water, which she gulps down quickly, her hands trembling slightly around the glass. Her breathing is still uneven, and I know I need to do something to help her calm down.

“Let me make you some chamomile tea,” I say, keeping my tone gentle.

She looks up at me, her eyes wide and glassy. “Chamomile?” she echoes, her voice shaky.

“It’s soothing,” I explain, crouching down to meet her gaze. “It’ll help you feel a little better.”

For a moment, she just stares at me, like she’s trying to decide whether to trust me. Then, finally, she nods. “Okay.”

I get up and head to the kitchen. This should help calm her down. It’s a small thing, but it’s better than doing nothing.

As the kettle boils, I glance over my shoulder to see her sitting on the edge of the couch. Her leg bounces anxiously, and I can feel the weight of her distress even from across the room. With the mug in hand, I head back to the living room, my strides quick and purposeful.

I find her still seated on the couch, her legs drawn up to her chest like a protective shield. My heart breaks seeing her like this. All the confidence and sass have vanished, leaving behind a girl who looks shaken and vulnerable, and it hurts me. I miss her feisty self. I sit down beside her, hoping my presence will offer some

comfort.

“I’m sorry,” she says with a weak smile. “I don’t think I can do this today.” She glances away, her voice shaking. “I’ll head home. I don’t want to waste your evening. You must have better things to do than take care of a scared girl.” She laughs weakly, but the tears shining in her eyes betray her. She tries to get up but fails miserably.

I pull her closer, and she shudders at the contact. “Don’t,” I say gently but firmly.

“Don’t what?” She asks breathlessly.

“Don’t ever fake anything with me.” My jaw clenches as I hold her gaze. “And you’re not going anywhere,” I add, leaving no room for argument.

“No, I can’t, Daniel,” she pleads, trying to pull her hand away from mine.

“No,” I respond firmly, gripping her hand again and refusing to let go. “You’re not leaving tonight.” Her eyes widen at my words. She opens her mouth to protest, but I press a finger to her lips. She looks too tired to fight back, and honestly, I need her to stay because I need to know that she’s okay—that she goes back to being her usual self.

“Please. For me, Anya,” I plead softly. Her expression shifts as she processes my words. Finally, she nods slowly, her resistance fading.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say, a small smile tugging at my lips as I squeeze her hand a little tighter. “You’re stuck with me then.” She smiles faintly, her eyes meeting mine. Relief washes over me, knowing she’s letting me in, even if it’s just a little. I have sensed how hard it is for her to be vulnerable with anyone, but I’m determined to make her feel safe and comfortable with me. Still holding her hand, I gently pull her to her feet.

“Come on,” I say, keeping my voice calm yet steady. “You need to rest. You look exhausted.” She looks at me, her expression blank and unreadable, as if she can’t comprehend what I’m saying. Without waiting for her to respond, I bend down and lift her into my arms.

Unlike that day at the beach, she doesn’t protest. Instead, she stays quiet and nuzzles into my neck. Her body feels so small and fragile in my arms. She leans into me, her weight a reminder of how much she’s been holding together on her own. My heart beats faster, but I focus on getting her to rest.

“You can relax now,” I whisper, my voice soft. “I’ve got you.”

I carry her to my bedroom and gently lay her down on the bed. “I’ll grab you something to wear,” I murmur before walking to my closet. I rummage through my clothes until I find a hoodie and a pair of sweatpants. She’s so much smaller than me that I know they’ll drown her, but at least they’ll be comfortable.

Giving her some privacy, I wait outside the door while she changes. When she opens it, my breath hitches. She looks tiny and absolutely adorable in my oversized clothes, the sleeves dangling past her hands, the fabric swallowing her frame.

Something primal stirs in me, a wave of possessiveness surging through my chest. I bite back the urge to pull her into my arms again. She’s still shaken, and now isn’t the time for my thoughts to wander.

Her eyes are half-closed, exhaustion written all over her face. She stands there like a lost child, and my heart aches at the sight. “Come on,” I say gently. “You should sleep for a while.” She nods without a word and climbs into my bed.

Anya Mehra is in my bed. The girl who’s occupied my every thought is lying here, wrapped in my blanket. Jesus, she looks so cute. If I stay any longer, I might want to

get into the bed to comfort her, so I stand up and head toward the door.

“Captain,” she calls out softly, and I freeze. Turning around, I meet her gaze.

“Yes, Firecracker?” I reply, my heart skipping a beat at her fragile tone.

She hesitates, her eyes pleading. “Can you lie down next to me?” she whispers, her voice barely audible.

I freeze for a moment, my heart clenching in my chest at her request. I want to protest, to say that it’s not a good idea, but I can’t bring myself to say the words out loud. She stillness looks so frail, so tiny and vulnerable, and a part of me wants nothing more than to wrap her in my arms and keep her safe forever.

“Of course,” I say aloud, my voice hoarse as I close the door behind me and walk over to the bed. As I settle down, I can feel the heat of her body next to me, her soft, weary sighs filling the room.

“How did you develop this fear?” I ask slowly as I hold her hand, hating the distance between us but not wanting to invade her space, not without her approval.

Her delicate fingers intertwine with mine, seeking comfort. She keeps her gaze fixed on the ceiling as she explains, her voice shaky but surprisingly calm. “I was seven when some of my cousins locked me up in the storeroom at my house.”

I suck in a breath, squeezing her fingers, silently urging her to continue. She chuckles painfully. “In their defense, I was wrong, so I probably deserved it.”

I clench my jaw. Her words and the way she tries to laugh it off infuriate me. I have a strong urge to find those cousins and slap some sense into them. But I keep my thoughts to myself.

“Like always, I had ratted them out,” she continues. “I never fit in with them. I felt like an outsider at my own family gatherings, you know.” She smiles, but I can see the tears forming in her eyes. I squeeze her hand slowly, trying to reassure her. “I still can’t. My brother is perfect in everything—he’s responsible, smart, and just so wonderful. At one point in my life, I wanted to hate him for being so perfect. He was always in the spotlight.”

She turns toward me, her gaze locking onto mine. “Don’t get me wrong. I love him very much in my own way, but I have this constant urge to compete with him in everything, even if I know I’ll lose.” She laughs softly, her eyes sad. “My parents definitely love both of us, but I feel bad that they have literally no expectations from me.” She snickers bitterly. “It’s a good thing, but I don’t know why I’m making it sound like it’s something bad.” She shakes her head and chuckles.

I listen to her in silence, my hand still holding hers. I can feel the vulnerability in her words, the pain and insecurity hidden behind her laughter. It makes me want to pull her into my arms and shield her from the world.

“Firecracker,” I say softly, my thumb gently tracing circles on her hand. It makes my heart swell, knowing she’s sharing all this with me, that she feels comfortable enough to tell me these things.

It’s funny how our issues are the exact opposite: Her parents don’t expect anything from her, while mine expect me to give up my passion and run their business.

The thing I don’t understand is how they can’t see her worth. She’s so hardworking and determined, always so focused on what she has to do. How can her parents ever think she’s not capable of doing wonders? It makes me sad that she wants to prove her presence when I can’t even take her out of my head.

“My father wants me to run his business,” I say quietly. “He wants me to give up on

my dreams of playing basketball professionally and take over because that would give me a stable income,” I add the words carefully, not because I’m trying to compare our struggles, but because I don’t want her to feel like she overshared. I don’t want her to regret opening up to me.

“I want to run a business.” She laughs weakly, the sound tinged with self-doubt. “But I’m afraid to start one.” She closes her eyes briefly. “I told my father once, you know, that I wanted to be like him—an entrepreneur.” She inhales deeply. “He laughed, patted my head, and said, ‘Plenty of time.’ That I could do anything I wanted to.” Her eyebrows furrow, her voice softening as she continues. “I don’t even know what that means. I don’t want to do anything else. I want him to teach me—the practicalities, the strategies. I want to learn by observing. Of course, I understand he can’t just hand me his business to gain experience.” She chuckles softly, almost bitterly.

We lie there in silence, her words hanging in the air. My thumb traces random patterns on her hand, offering a silent comfort I hope she feels. I don’t think she needs my advice right now. Sometimes, all I crave is someone who will listen—no suggestions, no opinions, unless I ask for them.

The only sound in the room is our breathing, steady and calming. Having her beside me like this...I’ve imagined it many times, maybe in wilder ways, but this—this is so much better.

“What kind of business do you want to start?” I ask, breaking the silence, genuinely interested.

“Something that contributes to society,” she says, her lips curving into a small smile. “Something that helps all the beings on this planet.” She sniggers softly. “How ambitious.”

“Firecracker,” I say, my voice low but certain. “You’re going to prove everyone

wrong. You're going to rule the world, and when you do—" I turn toward her, a smile tugging at my lips. "—I'll gladly kneel before you."

She chuckles softly, her laugh carrying a warmth that spreads through me. "And when you make it big," she replies. "I'll cheer for you from the sidelines." She tilts her head slightly, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Because there's no way in hell I'm kneeling in front of you." She rolls her eyes playfully. "Or anyone."

I smirk, unable to resist the thought that flashes through my mind.

???

ANYA

I groan as the sunlight hits me. I bury my face into the pillow, trying to escape the harsh assault of the sunlight. I frown. When did pillows become so hard and angular? I open my eyes reluctantly and blink a few times, my vision gradually adjusting to the light, my mind slowly reorienting itself. I notice that instead of a soft pillow, I am resting my head against something solid and firm. It takes a moment for my brain to register that the solid object is actually a muscular chest. I gasp, pulling away, and find myself face to face with an all-too-familiar set of green eyes staring back at me, his signature smirk dancing on his lips.

I swallow heavily, my eyes widening as I realize the situation I'm in. I'm not just resting against his chest; I'm practically sprawled across him, one of my legs draped over his waist, his arm casually encircling my lower back. Heat rushes to my cheeks as I become acutely aware of our position.

"Morning, sleepyhead," he greets, his voice still gravelly from sleep. "Comfy?" I immediately pull myself away from him, jumping out of bed, already missing the warmth. I wince as a wave of chilly air hits me .

"You know, for someone who was passed out cold, you're pretty damn fast," he says. I can see he's enjoying himself. I huff in annoyance. I place my hands on my hips, attempting to exude confidence despite the growing desire to wrap myself back up in his warm embrace.

"It's a talent," I retort, my voice dripping with sass. "One of many, in fact. I can do a lot of things fast," I add, a subtle innuendo lacing my words. What the hell?! How

can I make it worse? I internally groan. Great job, Anya.

“I am pretty sure you can.” He chuckles. But then his face sets into a serious expression. He observes me for a moment and I feel a little self-conscious, considering my hair must be a mess, and I definitely look like a crackhead when I wake up.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and my eyes widen slightly at the unexpected question. It throws me off, and I find myself fumbling for words.

“Yeah.” I try to chuckle, but a weird sound comes out of my throat. “I am so sorry for yesterday,” I manage to say. I run a hand through my tangled hair, trying to tame it but only managing to make it worse. “I apologize for all the trouble.” I clasp my hands behind my back, staring at him. “I will take my leave.” I try to smile but fail. “I don’t want to cause any more inconvenience than I already have.” I laugh bitterly. I look down at myself. “I will return your clothes after washing them,” I assure him. I quickly pick up my bag and my phone. I can feel his gaze on me.

“Stop it, Anya.” His voice is a low sigh, laced with exasperation, as his hand rakes through his hair. My hands freeze, faltering in their movements. For a moment, I can’t decide whether to turn or pretend I didn’t hear him. The air feels charged, and I hate how much his voice affects me.

I finally muster the courage to glance back, but my movements are sluggish, like I’m trying to delay the inevitable. As I turn, my eyes catch on something—his hand, still tangled briefly in his hair, his jaw tightening. A flicker of hesitation crosses his face before it softens again. It takes me a moment to realize he’s already moved closer. The warmth of his presence makes my stomach flip, and my breath catches in my throat. He’s so close. Too close.

“There’s no need to be awkward about anything,” he murmurs, his tone so soft it

feels like a secret meant only for me.

I open my mouth to say something witty and sarcastic, but all that comes out is a flustered stammer. My cheeks are on fire and my heart is racing a mile a minute. Damn it. I was supposed to be cool and collected. But I can't help it; the way he looks at me, the way he touches me—it all stirs something within me that I can't seem to control.

“I was just ...” I try to form a coherent sentence, but my mind feels like a chaotic swirl. I can feel his gaze on me and I can practically hear my own heart beating in my ears. I look up at him and manage a sheepish smile. “I was just...I'm not awkward, okay?”

He looks at me intently, searching my eyes to see if I am lying. “Okay then, can I have the pleasure of having breakfast with you?” He grins at me widely. Despite the chaos of emotions swirling within me, I can't help but find his infectious smile endearing. I run my fingers through my messy hair, trying to make myself somewhat presentable.

“I suppose I could spare a few minutes for breakfast.” I shrug, pretending to be nonchalant. His grin widens even more if that's possible. “I will have to change first,” I mutter. His face falls slightly, but he nods.

“You don't need to wash it though. I will do it myself,” he says. I open my mouth to argue. “No!” he exclaims. “Please don't argue,” he almost whines.

I roll my eyes at his plea, crossing my arms over my chest. “Fine, fine. I won't argue.” I sigh, unable to ignore the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of my lips. Damn it. Why does he have the ability to make me melt with just a pout? He grins when he senses he's won this battle.

“That’s my girl,” he teases, unable to resist making a quip. I shake my head in disbelief, but the way I gasp internally is too hilarious and worth thinking about. My heart flutters at his words but I am too much of a coward to ask him what he means by it. That sentence is going to be my topic for the overthinking session I will have tonight. His green eyes sparkle with a mix of pride and satisfaction. “I will wait outside for you.”

I nod gratefully. Once I am finally left alone in the room, I release a deep sigh, my shoulders visibly relaxing. I take out yesterday’s outfit from my bag. I hate to get out of his hoodie. It’s just so comfy, and it smells like him, but I have to. Obviously. It would be weird otherwise. Slipping out of his clothes, I put on mine, cringing at the smell of my sweat, but I will have to deal with it.

I manage to quickly tie my hair up in a bun, which makes me look a bit presentable, and I rummage through my bag for my perfume. I desperately need it. I don’t want people to die because I really stink. I take one last glance in the mirror, the final attempt at taming my unruly hair.

I shake my head, watching as the strands fly and settle back into their usual chaotic state. With a resigned sigh, I give up and accept the fact that my hair is going to have a mind of its own no matter what. The reflection in the mirror shows me a girl with a messy bun, sporting a casual outfit consisting of a leggings and sweatshirt.

I open the door but Daniel is nowhere to be seen. I look around. I walk into the living room when I hear the coffee machine run in the kitchen, so I stop in my tracks. To my surprise, he’s right there in the kitchen, brewing coffee. He looks so focused, his nose scrunched up. A small smile appears on my face automatically .

I hesitate for a moment, watching him quietly for a few seconds. Should I say something? Or should I just wait until he notices my presence and gawk at him?

I cough and he slowly turns towards me with a smile on his face. “And you call me a caffeine addict.” I smirk.

He chuckles lightly but doesn’t say anything. I lean against the counter, observing him work. My eyes involuntarily drift down to his hand, specifically the prominent veins running along his forearm. He pours the coffee into a mug and extends it towards me. I looked at him, puzzled as to why he is offering it to me. His usual playfulness is not visible on his face. He clears his throat, his Adam's apple bobbing, and I almost want to hit myself for noticing these small details.

“Umm...” He rubs his nape and gives me a sheepish smile. “I made it for you actually,” he says softly. “I mean, caffeine-deficient you are a menace to society, right?” he adds hurriedly.

I stare at this huge man, taken aback. He has no obligation to do this, none at all. In fact, he should be getting rid of me by now, considering how painfully weak and clingy I was yesterday, and here he is, not only offering me breakfast but also making coffee for me. How in the hell is it possible for me to ever not get this fluttery feeling around him? I mean, after all, I am just a girl. I accept his coffee wordlessly.

As I take a sip, my eyes widen. I am almost speechless, but I manage to speak. “Is it...?” My voice comes out thick with emotion.

“Yes. A caramel mocha with an extra shot of espresso,” he whispers, his eyes roaming over my face. He not only remembered my order but also brewed it for me. The gesture touches more than just my taste buds. As I watch him looking at my face, his eyes roaming all over, I can feel a tight sensation in my chest. I take another sip of the coffee, trying to mask the swirling emotions inside me. I want to cry, dammit; no one has ever done this for me.

“You know how to make it?” I ask slowly, not having enough courage to face his

eyes.

“No,” he mutters. “I learned it.”

I inhale sharply. I can’t help but feel my heart skip a beat. “I just wanted to learn about coffee in general,” he adds. I look up at him. Our eyes meet, but he immediately looks elsewhere. “I mean, you were praising your coffee so much, so I just thought...” He doesn’t finish the sentence, and honestly, I don’t want him to.

“Thank you,” I reply quietly. He looks at me, his eyes scanning my features for a moment. I can see a faint blush crawl on his cheeks as he rubs the back of his neck. “It’s perfect,” I say, meeting his eyes, my smile widening as I set the mug down.

“It’s no big deal. Don’t make it something it’s not,” he mutters, and I chuckle lightly to hide the disappointment bubbling in my chest. It’s definitely a big deal to me. I take another sip, the taste of the coffee bringing a wave of comfort.

“Okay, now that coffee is done, what do you want for breakfast?” he asks in an attempt to lighten the mood. He rolls up his sleeves, and I almost choke on the coffee because, wow , he looks too sexy. He raises his eyebrows. I just give him a forced smile. He reaches out and gives me a few light pats on my back. I clear my throat, a blush creeping onto my cheeks as I attempt to compose myself.

“I am fine.” I cough. “Anything will do,” I murmur, slightly distracted by his veiny arms.

“You’re going to taste my pancakes then.” My eyes widen and I mentally hit myself for giving everything a double meaning.

He raises an eyebrow, a smirk playing on his lips as he leans against the counter. “What?” I croak, desperately trying to control the blush that creeps onto my cheeks .

“Nothing.” He chuckles, his voice laced with amusement.

“So, what’re you waiting for?” My voice falters, my brain struggling to come up with a retort. “Start working.”

He just laughs, the sound sending a shiver down my spine. “Yes, ma’am.” He mocks a salute, and I roll my eyes as he starts preparing the batter mix.

He moves around the kitchen with an ease that is strangely attractive. I can’t help but watch as he effortlessly whisks the ingredients together, his muscles flexing under the fabric of his black sweatshirt. He pours the mixture into a hot pan. The pancakes sizzle and bubble, the smell of fresh batter filling the air.

He expertly cooks the pancakes, flipping them with a swiftness that is both impressive and hot. I am definitely not this swift. I need to mentally prepare myself, scream, and shout at Arnav, and I still end up breaking it into two halves. He plates two fluffy pancakes and I can hardly contain my anticipation. He brings the plate over, setting it in front of me, the stack of pancakes still steaming. I inhale the aroma, my mouth watering. I hadn’t realized I was starving until now.

I take a bite of one of the pancakes, the flavors exploding in my mouth, and I let out an involuntary moan of pleasure. I look up at him. His eyes darken. “These are incredible,” I manage to mutter as I look away, focusing on the pancakes. He takes the seat across from me. I swallow. The pancakes are so good I could cry. “You’re not going to have any?” I ask as I finish chewing.

“I prefer to watch,” he says as a devilish grin makes its way to his face. I roll my eyes. I am highly aware of his intense gaze, but nothing can stop me from devouring these pancakes, so I ignore him as much as I can. It’s difficult to ignore someone who is as tall as him.

As soon as I am done, I push the chair back and get up. “I will get going,” I announce. He doesn’t say anything, but I still add, “My brother is going to kill me. I didn’t even tell him where I was.” I give him a sheepish smile. I walk toward the door without glancing back because I cannot, for the love of coffee, face him.

“Firecracker,” he says quietly. I can feel his presence behind me. “I meant it yesterday,” he whispers in my ear. I inhale sharply, feeling his breath on my nape. “You will conquer the world someday,” he says, his tone gentle yet firm.

“Thank you,” I murmur. I look at him over my shoulder. “For everything.” And before he can respond, I hurry out, taking the stairs this time.

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ANYA

“Where the hell were you, Anya Mehra?!” my brother yells as soon as I enter the apartment. I wince. Oh no, I am dead. I turn around, closing the door behind me. There’s only one way to calm him down. I walk towards him slowly, stopping only a few centimeters away. I look up at him; he’s glaring at me angrily. I wrap my arms around him slowly. He stiffens only for a moment and then hugs me back. I close my eyes and sigh. “Are you okay?” he asks, his voice gentle this time. I nod into his chest.

“I got stuck in the elevator yesterday,” I explain silently. My brother pulls away, eyeing me carefully.

“Where? And why didn’t you call me?” he asks, his tone sharp, but I can see the worry in his eyes. I look at my feet, feeling guilty and a little sheepish.

“I’m sorry. I called Daniel, considering he was in the building,” I tell him.

“The basketball team’s captain?” he asks, a little surprised. I can’t blame him. I would be too if someone said two months ago that I am hanging out with jocks. Don’t get me wrong; there’s nothing wrong with them. They’re just not my type, or so I thought. I nod.

“He’s my assignment partner,” I explain. “So, I went to his place for the project, but I was too shaken after the incident, and he told me to rest. I fell asleep.” I clarify. “I am so sorry. I should have informed someone, but as soon as I hit the bed, I just passed out. I think I was too exhausted.” I make the best puppy face I can. He chuckles

softly, pulling me back into a hug.

“I am glad you’re fine,” he says softly, ruffling my hair, but I don’t snap at him for doing it. This isn’t common for us, so I just savor the moment.

He lets me go. Siya is standing right behind him, and Zeke is beside her. He’s eyeing her carefully. I want to push him away, but obviously, I don’t. He hasn’t done anything worth that. “I am also relieved that you’re okay,” Siya says quietly, smiling at us.

“I apologize formally to both of you.” I bow and give them a sheepish grin. Siya laughs while Arnav just stares at me as if he has already lost interest in everything. He usually seems like that.

“I was just about to call the police.” Arnav says.

“To what? Find me or lock me up so I don’t get lost?” I tease.

“Well, what can I do? You’re a walking disaster magnet with an impaired sense of direction,” he retorts.

I gasp in mock offense, holding my hand over my heart. “I beg your pardon. I prefer the term ‘adventure magnet.’ I live for excitement and novelty.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “You do realize that’s the exact opposite of who you are.”

“Fine, fine.” I raise my hands as if in surrender. “I give up,” I announce. He just shakes his head. “I will go get ready. I missed the first lecture anyway,” I exclaim, rushing to my room. I throw off my clothes and quickly pull on a fresh outfit: a simple woolen blue dress and comfortable sneakers. I brush my hair in a hurry, barely noticing the tangles as I swipe a comb through it. I grab an apple from the kitchen and

toss it into my bag. Siya's waiting for me by the door, her expression patient but slightly amused.

"Ready?" she asks, glancing at the clock on her phone. "You really are quick," she comments.

"Yeah, let's go!" I reply, slinging my bag over my shoulder and hurrying out the door. We take the usual bus to campus. I sit next to Siya, soaking up the sunlight coming through the window.

"Are you okay?" she asks gently, not looking at me. I squeeze her hand.

"Yeah, I am fine," I reassure her. She hums. We sit in silence for the rest of the ride. I still hold her hand though, grateful for her. As we step off the bus, I scan my surroundings. It's always a wonder to me how people are so energetic in the mornings. I just want to eat and head back to bed.

I pull Siya with me as we weave through the crowd of students. I groan. "I hate morning lectures."

Siya gives me a forced smile. "Agreed." I chuckle lightly.

I hear a familiar laugh and my steps falter. It isn't difficult to spot him considering that he is taller than half of the crowd. A small smile appears on my face. He's talking to someone. My eyes land on the girl next to him.

She's a cheerleader; her outfit gives that away. Her long, golden hair is pulled into a high ponytail and she's wearing a bright, sparkly outfit that's both vibrant and eye-catching. She's laughing at something Daniel said, her eyes crinkling at the corners in a way that makes her look genuinely pleased.

Daniel seems to be enjoying himself, too as he chats with the girl. He has a friendly expression on his face and he occasionally runs his hand through his hair in a careless manner. The girl seems captivated by his attention, and from what I can see, she's clearly attracted to him. I can't blame her because he is one good-looking and charming man.

It's clear that they are having a good time together. My heart sinks, and I feel a pang of jealousy. Why should it bother me so much? After all, Daniel is just a classmate—he's not mine. Still, seeing him so engaged with someone else stirs up an uncomfortable mix of emotions. The way the girl hangs onto his every word, giggling at his jokes, and how he seems genuinely entertained by the conversation makes me want to punch both of them, and I do not believe in violence. "Anya, we are running late," Siya whispers, her gentle voice snapping me out of my thoughts. I look at her. She has a look of understanding on her face, but I am glad that she doesn't ask me any questions or give me any advice. I nod gently, giving her a forced smile, although I know she knows how I feel.

"Did you know I started watching a K-drama yesterday?" Siya says as she attempts to change the subject and I chuckle.

"You and your obsession with K-dramas." I sigh and shake my head.

"They have everything: romance, drama, suspense, comedy...and don't even get me started on how good-looking the actors are!"

I roll my eyes, but a small smile tugs at my lips. "You say that every time. It's like you've memorized a script to convert non-believers into K-drama fans."

She giggles, undeterred by my teasing. "That's because it's true! And don't act like you're above it. You're the one who stayed up all night binge-watching Crash Landing On You after I made you watch the first episode."

I groan, covering my face with my hands. “You’ll never let me forget that, will you?”

“Never,” she declares proudly. “And do you know why? Because that was the moment I knew even someone as serious as you could appreciate a good love story with a sprinkle of absurdity.” I laugh and shake my head.

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DANIEL

“No, Dad. Please stop exerting yourself,” I whisper-yell as people around me give me looks. I want a break from the hectic environment on the college campus, and I want to form a strategy for the upcoming match. It’s an important one for the team, and being the captain adds extra pressure, so here I am strolling in the garden, trying to find a peaceful spot where I won’t be disturbed.

“I am not doing anything, Daniel. Just picking up some boxes.” He grunts.

“Seriously, can you please give it a break? Ask someone else to do it,” I almost shout.

“Fine, fine. I will give up.” He chuckles. “You’re so much like your mother,” he says gently, sounding nostalgic.

“I know, but I would say I am a milder version. She would have beaten you up by now,” I joke. She wouldn’t have, but she was a strong-willed woman, and no one could say no to her. We had to do what she wanted us to.

“I will let you go anyway. I am a little tired. I will sleep for a while,” he murmurs.

“Yeah, take care, Dad.” I smile as I hear him ruffle around with the bedsheet .

“Yeah, I will, and you do too,” he says. I spot a bench near the lake. It seems to be empty, so I make my way there.

“I will, Dad.” My eyes land on a girl sitting on the nearby bench. She has her hair up

in a tight bun, and if I am not wrong—and I don't think I am because I have noticed her hair too many times—it's Anya. The amount of times I have wanted to play with her hair is crazy but not crazier than the fact I've memorized her features.

I walk a little closer to confirm my suspicion. The smooth and delicate slope of her neck is exposed. Her outfit—a simple sweater and a pair of jeans—seems to hug her body in a flattering but comfortable manner. I see the mole on her right cheek. It's her. My mood automatically brightens. As I get closer, her scent hits me, and I can't help but inhale deeply. She's too engrossed to even notice me as I sit next to her. Her eyes are focused on the book, a constant frown creasing her face. Her lips are slightly parted as if she's about to say something. Suddenly, she lets out a soft sigh, and a frown appears on her forehead. I could just watch her read a book and be the most entertained and happiest man ever.

I can feel the warmth radiating from her body, and it's taking all of my self-control not to reach out and touch her. “Hi,” I greet softly, not trying to startle her. Her head snaps up, her eyes widening. She looks at me and her gaze narrows. Almost immediately her attention is back to that damn book.

“Firecracker?” I ask. She doesn't budge at all, as if I am not here. My brows furrow in confusion. Is she ignoring me? But why would she? I don't understand. “Anya,” I repeat, trying to gain her attention, but still nothing.

There's only one way to make her look at me now. I smirk. “Anya,” I say in a sing-song voice. “Anya,” I repeat. “Anya.” I raise my volume this time. She closes her eyes and exhales sharply. A muscle in her jaw twitches and she slowly looks at me, a fake smile plastered on her face .

“What?” she replies in a sing-song voice, her eyebrows raised. She shakes her head. “What is it, captain?”

“I knew you would notice me if I annoyed you somehow.” I chuckle.

“Congratulations. Do you want a prize for it?” she asks, sarcasm dripping from her voice. I laugh, and she rolls her eyes.

“Why were you ignoring me?” I ask, genuinely curious. She folds her arms.

“I was not.” She says, “I was just reading my book. It was an interesting part, definitely more interesting than you.” She smirks. My eyes narrow.

“Ouch, that hurts,” I retort, folding my arms across my chest. I pout and pretend to look wounded, but the corners of my lips twitch with amusement. I can’t help but be amused by her quick wit and sassy response.

“What are you doing here?” she asks.

I smile softly. “Just wanted a break, and I seem to relax near water.” And you. “So here I am.” I grin widely. “What about you, Firecracker? You following me or something?” I smirk.

A blush rises to her cheeks. It’s my favorite color and I love it. For someone who hates red, I sure am a hypocrite. “I was here first,” she replies haughtily. “And it will always be a mystery to me how one can be so full of themselves.” She huffs.

“I’m not full of myself; I just have a healthy dose of confidence,” I retort with a smirk.

She rolls her eyes at my cocky response, her arms still folded across her chest. “Confidence or arrogance. Potayto potahto,” she retorts.

I chuckle, enjoying her witty banter. “You can call it whatever you want,

firecracker.”

“So are you enjoying yourself then? I mean, you are having fun by irritating me, but other than that, I mean to ask.” She falters. “I mean, why did you want a break?” I smile at her attempt to hide her concern behind her usual sass.

I lean back against the bench, stretching out my limbs. “Oh, I’m having a good time here. Who needs peace and solitude when I can just bother you?” I reply with a cheeky grin. But her question about the break catches me off guard. I pause for a moment, my smirk faltering slightly before being replaced by a nonchalant shrug. “Eh, I just needed a breather from all the chaos on campus. You know how it is,” I say casually, keeping my tone light. “With power comes great responsibility.” I chuckle. “I am the captain, and I am not used to this, so it’s kind of overwhelming.” I shrug. I look at her, her eyes studying my face carefully.

“You do look tired,” she comments.

“Thanks for the compliment.” I bow. She chuckles.

“I have this important match coming up.” I add. “So, I’m just stressed about that. I don’t usually stress over all this, but it will decide our position in the tournament, so it’s a very significant match.” I sigh, running my hands through my hair. “Hey!” I exclaim, all my focus on her. “Why don’t you come see this match?” I offer. Please say yes , I pray.

Her eyes widen. “You’re inviting me to your match?” she asks, pointing a finger at herself. I nod. She scrutinizes me for a second and then leans back against the bench, her fingers idly playing with a loose thread on her sweater.

“I’ve got a lot of studying to do,” she says.

“Are you kidding me?” I scoff. “You can take a break for a few hours, Anya.” I shake my head in disappointment.

She avoids my eyes. “I don’t know a single thing about basketball. I won’t understand a thing, so it won’t be fun for me honestly,” she mutters. Ah, so that’s the problem.

A small smile appears on my lips. “Who said you need to be a basketball expert to enjoy a game?” I lean in a little towards her, trying to catch her gaze, but she keeps avoiding my eyes, her head bowed down.

“It’s like saying you can’t enjoy a movie because you don’t understand the intricacies of filmmaking,” I say. My voice is soft. “Watching a game isn’t about the technicalities; it’s about the experience. But—” I stand up. She finally looks at me. I grin at her. “Come with me.” I extend a hand towards her, indicating she should take it.

She looks at my hand carefully and raises her eyebrow. “Where?” she asks.

“I will teach you the basics of basketball,” I reply, my enthusiasm evident in my tone. Her eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“Why?” she asks, eyes narrowing in confusion. I step closer to her, my hand still held out.

“Why not?” I shrug. “I think you’ll be a quick learner.”

“Why would you do that?” she whispers. “I am sure you must be busy. Let’s leave it.”

“Come on. It will be a practice session for me. I swear if it isn’t fun for you, we will

stop.” She relents and finally takes my hand, her slender fingers brushing against mine. The touch sends a jolt of electricity through me, and I can’t help but feel a sense of satisfaction at the contact. As I help her up, I note how well her hand fits in mine. I look into her eyes and her breath hitches. That’s how I know she feels it too.

“There’s a basketball court nearby. It’s usually empty. Let’s go there.” Unwillingly, I let go of her hand before she becomes awkward about it. We make our way to the basketball court. I keep glancing at her every few seconds as she talks about the book and the mystery unfolding in it. I listen intently to her every word, hanging onto every detail of the story she’s describing. As she talks animatedly about the book, my gaze drifts from her animated expressions to her lips, the words flowing effortlessly from them. It’s like music to my ears, and I realize I could listen to her talk about anything and never get tired .

As we arrive at the basketball court, Anya looks around. I take a moment to appreciate the crisp, cool air the late evening has brought. The soft, orange glow of the setting sun paints the trees around us in hues of gold and amber. I glance at her. She looks so divine. The familiar sight of the court—worn and well-loved with its faded painted lines and the faint scent of sneaker rubber—fills me with a sense of comfort, my mind already adjusting to this space.

I take a ball from the storage shed near the court, bouncing it from hand to hand. I turn to look at her. “You ready?” I ask with a cocky grin.

“Okay.” She rolls her eyes. “I am learning from the Dr. Dunkalicious himself.” She smirks.

I wince. “I have no idea who came up with that name but God help them if I ever find out.” I exhale sharply. She laughs. She freaking laughs . I don’t care if it is because of me or at me, but if I get to hear that laugh, I will gladly accept that stupid nickname. Maybe tattoo it on my head. I am sure she would find that amusing too.

“What? Are you just going to stand there and gawk?” she questions, folding her arms.

“Yes, I am,” I say truthfully because her mouth opens and a blush creeps up her cheeks. She jiggles her leg. She’s too cute for my heart.

“We-well stop it.” She fumbles. “You look stupid,” she says, her eyes not meeting mine. I chuckle at her flustered self.

“Okay, fine. Now I am not going to go into too much detail.” I dribble the ball as I walk toward her. “Let’s just learn the game process, no technicalities for now, okay?” I ask, and she nods. As I walk closer to Anya, the ball bouncing effortlessly in my hands, I can’t help but appreciate the way her eyes follow its movement. She may be stubborn and snarky, but there’s an eagerness lurking within her that’s hard to miss. “First and foremost, the aim of the game is simple: score more points than the other team,” I explain, passing the ball to her. She fumbles with it and looks at me, her eyes wide with uncertainty. “There are five players from each team on the court. The job is to aim for the hoop.” I aim for the hoop and shoot. “Like that, and the players from other teams have to stop it. That’s all,” I explain. “Well, that’s all you need to understand,” I add.

“Now, your turn,” I say, passing the ball to her again.

“No, I am not doing it. I am telling you I am going to be very bad,” she says, shaking her head.

“Let me help you,” I say as I stand behind her, my chest brushing against her back, my hands settling on her wrists. I move into her space, wrapping my arms around her to adjust her grip on the ball. I can feel her stiffening up a little as I settle behind her, but I continue. “Relax your shoulders,” I murmur, my lips dangerously close to her ear. I can feel her breath hitch as my words register to her. “You need to loosen up a little,” I say gently, my fingers guiding her wrists to the correct position.

“Now, just follow through with the motion,” I say, my words just above a whisper. “You should feel your arm moving forward and extending as you shoot.” I move closer, my body pressing against hers. The warmth of her back is strangely comforting.

“Don’t overthink it,” I murmur, my chin resting on her shoulder. Her skin is soft, the subtle scent of her perfume filling my nostrils. “Just focus and follow through.” I adjust her wrists slightly, my fingers lightly brushing against her hands.

“Just trust yourself, okay?” I murmur, my breath teasing her ear. She swallows, the rise and fall of her chest more pronounced, and there’s a slight tremor in her hands. She gives a short nod in confirmation.

“Good,” I say, my lips just shy of her skin. “You can do this.” I guide her arms, helping her aim. “Now, shoot.” I look down at her. Her cheeks are flushed. I can see she’s trying hard to focus, and I feel my chest swell with pride and probably happiness that I can affect her like this. “See, you did it,” I say, a smile playing on my lips. Her back is still against my chest, and I’m in no rush to pull away. I have the sudden urge to rest my chin back on her shoulder.

“You’re a natural,” I murmur. In an instance, she steps from me, and I almost whine. “I-I think I should head home,” she says. Her abrupt announcement throws me off guard, and I can’t shake the sense of disappointment that washes over me. I want the moment to linger a little longer, but I think I pushed it too far.

“Okay,” I reply quietly. We stand there gazing at each other, my eyes never leaving hers. She’s too breathtakingly beautiful to ever pay heed to anyone or anything else in this world. She bends down to pick up her bag. As she starts walking away, I feel this urgent need to stop her.

“Come to my match, Firecracker. I would love that,” I whisper.

She halts mid-step, then turns slowly, a sarcastic smile tugging at her lips. “Why don’t you just invite your cheerleader friend instead?”

I blink, caught completely off guard. “What?”

“You seemed to be having a great time with her earlier,” she snaps, her words sharp, the smile on her face not reaching her eyes.

It takes me a second to piece together what she’s talking about, but then it clicks. Katie. She must’ve seen us talking earlier. Is this what I think this is? If so, I might be the happiest man alive.

I smirk, taking a step closer to her. “What are you talking about?”

She huffs, crossing her arms defensively. “You know exactly what I mean.”

“Anya,” I say, dragging out her name as I close the distance between us. “Are you jealous?”

Her eyes widen slightly, and I catch the faintest gasp slip past her lips before she quickly schools her expression.

“No,” she says, though her voice wavers, giving her away.

I lean closer, grinning now. “Were you stalking me, Firecracker?”

She takes a step back, her cheeks burning. “You’re so self-obsessed,” she snaps, her voice rising.

I chuckle, unable to resist it. “If I’m so self-obsessed, why were you watching me?”

“I wasn’t!” she blurts, her tone defensive. “I was just going for a class. Siya was with me, you can-” I put a finger on her lips and lean down to whisper in her ear.

“Don’t over-explain. You’re giving yourself away.” She doesn’t move, her body stiff but I can hear her fast breathing.

Then, as if she is broken out of a trance she pushes me away, “Shut up!” She yells.

I smile. I love how easy it is to get a reaction out of her. “Why do you care who I was talking to?” I cock an eyebrow. She huffs, her lips parting as if to argue, but no words come out.

“Thought so,” I murmur, my voice dropping lower. “You were jealous.”

Her cheeks flush deeper and she glares at me, her voice laced with frustration. “You’re impossible.”

“And you’re avoiding the question.”

She lets out a sharp breath, her hands clenching at her sides. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. I just-” She shakes her head, “I’ll come to your stupid match. There’s the answer to your question. Happy now?”

I grin, stepping back just enough to let her pass. “Ecstatic.”

“And that’s not because I like you or something, do you get it? I just have never-”

“Over-explaining again.” I smile smugly. She closes her eyes and exhales sharply. She points a finger at me and opens her mouth but decides against saying anything. She gives me one final look and storms off, her steps quick and sharp, and I watch her go, unable to wipe the grin off my face.

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DANIEL

As we enter the arena, the roar of the crowd hits me like a tidal wave. The Pinecrest University gym is packed with spectators, the buzz of excitement almost palpable in the air. The bright overhead lights cast a harsh glare on the polished court, making the hardwood floor gleam under our sneakers. The energy is electric, a mix of nervous anticipation and adrenaline that is impossible to ignore.

We just had a team meeting where Coach and I delivered our final pep talks. It is time to put those words into action. I clap my hands together and address the team one last time. “Give your best!” I announce, my voice cutting through the din of the arena.

The guys nod in response, their faces a mix of determination and nerves. They scatter to their respective positions, moving with practiced ease as they prepare for the game. The pre-game rituals—stretching, shooting practice, and last-minute strategy reviews—are underway. I take a deep breath, letting the energy of the crowd fuel my focus. I take a moment to check on my team, seeing all the familiar faces, their eyes focused and intense, ready to give their all.

I can feel the tension building. The opposing team, the Miami Eagles, is known for their aggressive play and strong defense, and every moment of this game is going to be crucial. I have to stay sharp and lead my team through what promises to be a high-stakes match.

The buzzer sounds, signaling the start of the game. The court is a whirlwind of activity as both teams sprint into action. The ball is tossed in the air for the tip-off, and we are off.

The first few minutes are a blur of fast breaks and intense defense. The opposing team is formidable, their players moving with precision and speed. Our defense has to be on point. I call out instructions, guiding my teammates through the chaos. They score, and the entire crowd boos. It will be disastrous if we lose on our home court. Not only will we be knocked out of the tournament, but also the fact we lost here would bring so much trolling. Not that it affects any of us, because one thing I always suggest to the guys is to focus on efforts, not on results, and it will all work out in the end eventually.

As we continue playing, the pressure mounts. The Miami Eagles are relentless, their players working together like a well-oiled machine. They make another basket, a three-pointer that has the entire court on edge. The crowd's booing grows louder, the atmosphere becoming more intense as the home team is struggling to keep up.

Seeing the tension on my teammates' faces, I call out once more, my voice firm but calm. "Stay focused, guys. We've got this. Let's get back on defense and make our comeback." I can feel the urgency building with every passing minute. The score is slipping away, and we desperately need to regroup. I come face to face with Jayson, the captain of the Miami Eagles. He smirks.

"Seems like you're struggling, Grayson," he taunts me. I clench my jaw, but I take the opportunity to snatch the ball from him. I pass it to Louis.

"The game isn't over," I bark back, chasing Louis as he sprints to the other side of the court. He leaps and shoots for a three-pointer, and the ball lands in the hoop, making the crowd jump up in excitement.

I look at Jayson, his smug smirk now replaced by a scowl. I can't help but feel a burst of satisfaction. We are still in this game, and if he underestimates us, that's good, because then it will be an easy win.

The air crackles with energy, and the crowd is on its feet, cheering louder than before. That's when I spot her in the front stands, her long black hair cascading over her shoulders.

My heart skips a beat.

She looks gorgeous, as always. She has a wide smile on her face, her eyes on me. As my gaze zeroes in on her, a warm feeling surges through me. She's here. She came. I can't help but smile as she gives me a double thumbs-up, her grin radiant. Seeing her there, cheering for me, is like an adrenaline shot that heightens my senses. Her presence alone is enough to make me feel more alive, more focused and energized than ever. There's no way in hell I am losing in front of her. I pat Louis on the back.

"We're back in the game, baby," he exclaims, hugging me. The game picks up speed, and I can feel the momentum shift in our favor. With the crowd now behind us, every pass, every dribble, and every shot feels sharper and more precise. We are moving as one, our teamwork honed from countless hours of practice. The Miami Eagles are good, but they have nothing on the fire that is burning inside us now.

Jayson tries to shake me off, but I stay on him like glue, matching his move for move. The crowd is a blur of color and noise, but I keep my focus razor-sharp. The game clock is ticking down, but instead of panicking, I feel a strange sense of calm wash over me. This is our moment.

Louis gets the ball again, and I can see the determination in his eyes. He is in the zone, and I know he is about to do something special. I move into position, ready to support him, but he doesn't need it. With a quick fake, he dodges their center and launches a three-pointer from way outside the arc. The ball sails through the air, and for a split second, the whole arena seems to hold its breath.

Swish . The ball goes through the net neatly, and the crowd erupts in a deafening

roar. I pump my fist in the air, adrenaline surging through my veins. We are closing the gap, and the Eagles are starting to falter. I can see it on their faces—the doubt, the uncertainty. That’s all I need. This is our game now.

Time is running out, but we are relentless. I steal the ball again—this time off a sloppy pass from Jayson—and sprint down the court. My heart pounds in my chest, but I keep my cool, eyeing the hoop. I can feel the presence of my teammates around me, their energy pushing me forward.

I fake a drive to the basket, drawing their defenders in, then launch for another three. The ball arcs high, then drops straight through the net. The crowd goes wild, and I can hear my teammates shouting in triumph. We are now in the lead, officially. Jayson is desperate now, barking orders at his team, but they are scrambling. I can taste victory, and I am not going to let it slip away. With just seconds left on the clock, the Eagles try to mount one last attack, but our defense is a wall. I intercept their final pass, and the buzzer sounds.

The gym explodes with noise, My teammates gather around me, and it takes me a moment to realize we have won. I look across the court and see Jayson staring at me, his expression a mix of frustration and grudging respect. I give him a nod. He played a good game, but tonight is ours.

My eyes land on Anya once again. Her hair is now in a loose and messy bun. Our eyes meet, and I have this urgent need to hear her voice, look at her closely, and know that I am the reason for her smile.

‘Wait for me,’ I mouth. She twists her face in confusion. I repeat my words. Her eyes narrow down at me. I don’t think I have ever met someone as cute as her. She smiles finally and gives me a thumbs-up.

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ANYA

Considering I do not enjoy sports much, I had a thrilling time today. Sophia and Siya were so shocked when I said that I would accompany them to the match. I chuckle, remembering Sophia's dramatic fainting as shown in an Indian TV shows.

Initially, it was a little overwhelming because it was too crowded and loud for me, but as soon as the game began, the intense match made me forget about it, or I can admit it to myself, at least: a green-eyed guy did. The way he moved with ease and his confidence on the court was just so attractive. He seemed like a completely different person. He was so focused, unlike his usual carefree self, and his eyes sparkled with determination. He is talented and a very good captain. It was a different side of him I saw today. I am glad I chose to come after all.

But right now, as I wait for him in the parking lot, I am beginning to think he has forgotten that he asked me to wait for him. I look at my watch. It's been half an hour. Should I wait or go? It's getting dark, and I sent Soph and Siya away because it's extremely cold. And maybe I just wanted to be with him alone. I sigh. He loves to keep me waiting. I should leave. I am hungry, plus Arnav will be stressed if he finds out that I am out alone, because whether I admit it or not, he is right: I do have a history of getting lost.

But what if Daniel comes after I leave? I do not want him to think that I didn't wait. Maybe I will text him as soon as I sit in the taxi. I huff in disappointment. I want to see him. But he must be celebrating with his teammates, and I understand. Do I even want to be alone with him again? Especially after last time? How stupid I was to question him about that cheerleader. I mean it's his life, he can talk to whoever the

fuck he wants to. Was I jealous? Yes. Will I ever admit it to him. No. I huff and open my phone to book a cab.

“Anya.” I hear his voice. I look up from my screen to find him approaching me. He jogs toward me and I can’t help but sweep my gaze over his body.

“I am sorry for keeping you so long,” he says as he eyes me. “You were going to leave,” he observes, his voice laced with relief.

I fidget with the phone in my hand. “I thought you forgot,” I whisper as I inhale his scent. His hair is wet, probably from the shower he must have taken.

His eyes darken at my words, a sly smile playing on his lips. He moves closer until our bodies are barely a few inches apart. I feel that now familiar tug in my heart whenever he gets this close to me.

“Forget you?” he murmurs, his voice low and rough. “I could never forget you, even if I tried. And I don’t want to try,” he whispers. His fingers reach out, gently prying the phone from my grasp and putting it in his pocket. My eyes widen. He smiles softly as he looks down at me. “I am sorry, though, to keep you waiting,” he says.

“What do you mean by that?” I whisper .

He stares at me for a moment, “It’s impossible to forget you because...” I hold my breath. “...only you can drop murderous comments in the middle of conversations with ease.” He laughs.

I blink at him. “You’re impossible.” I huff.

“Let’s have dinner,” he suggests, carefully taking a step away, and I miss the warmth radiating from his body.

“No, there’s no need for that,” I mutter quickly.

“Shh.” He keeps a finger on my lips. The contact sends a shiver down my spine. I gaze up at him, his eyes intense and focused on me, his presence both overwhelming and comforting at the same time.

“I just won a game, Anya, please.”

“I am not that hungry,” I reply, and my stomach growls as if on cue. I mentally curse my body. Why the hell can’t it support me for once? What I don’t understand is that a few minutes ago, I wanted to see him. But now that he is in front of me, I am trying to get away.

“See? Your stomach agrees with me at least.” He smirks. I want to punch it off his face, but he looks too handsome, unfortunately.

“You’re not getting out of this one, Firecracker,” he adds when I do not reply. “Your stomach is on my side.”

“Fine, whatever,” I grumble. He chuckles.

“Let’s go,” he says, gesturing toward the car. He opens the passenger door for me. I get in, thanking him as I do. He gets into the driver’s seat and starts the engine. As he pulls out of the parking lot, we fall into a comfortable silence. I glance at him occasionally, not liking this quietness.

“You played well today, captain,” I whisper. He looks at me briefly.

“Thank you.” He smiles. “So, you enjoyed the match?” he asks, his voice hopeful.

I nod. “Initially, I thought you’d lose and blame me.” I laugh quietly. “I am

superstitious that way. I thought I had jinxed you or something.” I chuckle. When he doesn’t reply, I peep at him.

“I guess you’re my good luck charm then,” he murmurs, smiling and looking at the road.

My heart skips a beat at his words. I don’t understand how easily he says such things. I feel my cheeks heat up. I look away, diverting my attention toward the skyline visible from the bridge.

We pull into a parking lot. My eyes scrutinize the small yet cozy-looking diner. It has an old-fashioned charm. The neon sign above the door reads Rosie’s and its light glows softly, giving the place a warm and inviting feeling. I feel a little relaxed and kind of impressed that he brought me to a small diner instead of a big restaurant.

I get out of the car. The cold air nips at my cheeks, making me grateful for the warmth of the diner’s interior. Daniel holds the door open for me with a theatrical bow. “After you, milady.”

I roll my eyes but can’t help the smile that creeps onto my face. As we step inside, the smell of sizzling burgers and strawberries fills the air, and I can’t help but feel a little giddy.

“This place is cute,” I whisper as we settle into our booth. Daniel grins at me from across the table, seeming to be quite pleased with himself.

“I am glad you approve.” He winks. Oh my god. I am breathless.

He waves at the waitress. I catch a glimpse of the easy confidence he carries with him, whether he’s on the court or just enjoying a meal. I like how he is so relaxed with me, but I guess he is that way with all his friends, so nothing special.

“I will take the usual,” he says. The waitress smiles, and her eyes linger on his biceps more than I like, but I get it. I would be ogling him too if I were in her place.

“What would you recommend?” I ask him.

“I like the burgers here, and since you like sweet stuff, you can have a strawberry milkshake. It’s their specialty, but it isn’t my taste.” He shrugs.

“I will take your suggestion then.” I repeat the order to the waitress. She nods at us and walks away.

Daniel leans back in his seat, his gaze never leaving me. There’s an intensity in his eyes that makes me feel like I am the center of the universe. He is a very considerate, attentive guy in general, but with the attraction I feel for him, it becomes hard to not take it otherwise.

“Shouldn’t you be celebrating with your team?” I ask, genuinely curious as to why he is here with me.

“Yeah, probably,” he says, resting his chin on his hands, not breaking our eye contact. “But I guess this was more tempting,” he says quietly. My heart does a cartwheel, and I look away, trying to hide my blush.

The waitress soon returns with our orders, and I am grateful for the interruption. She places the plates and milkshakes before us. The smell of the greasy burger makes my mouth water.

Taking a bite of my burger, I can’t help but moan quietly at how good it is. I am definitely going to be a regular customer now, considering it is also quite close to the campus. “It really is very good,” I say with my mouth still full. I don’t believe in manners while I am eating, except maybe chewing loudly, because that irritates the

hell out of me.

Daniel stares at me, his carefree self no longer visible. His Adam apple bobs as he gulps loudly. “Told you so,” he says, clearing his throat and shifting in his seat.

I frown at him. “Are you alright?” I ask.

He coughs. “Yeah, just feeling a little hot,” he says.

“It’s cold, Daniel. Are you okay?” I ask again. He hums and continues to eat. I observe him, but he doesn’t look at me at all. I shrug and dig in, too.

I take a sip of milkshake and grunt. Goddammit . “This is heavenly!” I exclaim. He shifts in his seat again, a scowl forming on his face, and I want to wipe it off. I take another sip, licking my lips.

“Are we done?” he asks as I finish the last bite of my burger. What is wrong with him? He was chill half an hour ago. Did I do something? I don’t think so, because I was just eating my food. Maybe he is tired, or he realized it would have been better if he had just gone out with his team. I feel my heart constrict. I nod wordlessly.

We get out of the booth and exit the diner after he pays our bill. I insist on splitting it, but according to him, it is his treat, and he is in a bad mood so I give up. He opens the door for me.

I get in the car and he does the same. I type in my apartment’s address in the GPS. We fasten our seatbelts, and he drives off. Our eyes meet for a second. His gaze softens, but I turn away, looking out of the window. I hate this tension.

I am usually okay with silence between us, but not this one; this one makes my heart feel heavy. I don’t think he regrets coming here with me. I am sure these thoughts

didn't even enter his mind, because for him, these are just trivial matters. He doesn't care about his wins or losses. All he cares about is his role as a captain and his game, which is nice, even for an amateur like me, so maybe I am just overthinking.

I take a sip of the milkshake. The way the strawberry flavor bursts into my mouth every single time is a mystery to me. This thing is godly. I am sure Soph would love this; she's obsessed with strawberries anyway. I wipe a drop from my lip and suck my finger. I am not ready to waste a single drop of this thing.

Daniel groans next to me. The car comes to a screeching stop. My eyes widen, and I cover the cup to save the drink from falling .

"What the hell?" I exclaim and look toward Daniel. His eyes are dark. He closes his eyes momentarily and clenches his jaw.

"I don't care how delicious this milkshake is, stop licking your lips, and for the love of God, stop moaning." He grits out.

I freeze when Daniel speaks, his voice low and deep. It makes a thrill run down my spine. I blink at him stunned, my heart beating madly in my chest. I can't figure out what's going on. Does it bother him? He's seemed restless since the diner. Do I affect him as much as he affects me? The air in the car suddenly feels heavy with tension.

"Uh...what?" I reply, trying to understand what is up.

"Nothing." He sighs, running his hand through his hair. "We have arrived," he says, avoiding my eyes. I stare at his disheveled hair. I fiddle with the seatbelt buckle.

"Right. We have arrived," I repeat. He doesn't budge. He stares ahead, at nothing in particular. I unbuckle the seatbelt. One thing that's clear from this exchange is that he is attracted to me physically, but that is not enough for me. I do not believe in one-

night stands. I am not a fun and spontaneous type of person, I guess. I have to stay away from this man, because I not only find him captivating physically, but his entire personality charms me. I want to keep spending time with him. I want him near me. I find reasons to be close to him, and I know it may feel good now, but in the long run, it is going to be heartbreaking.

Because if he asks, if he makes a move right now, I will willingly give in. I will let him do anything, because that's the power he has over me, and I hate that. He turns to look at me, his eyes travelling between my eyes and lips. I wait for him to move but he simply continues to gaze at my lips. I can't take this anymore. This is suffocating. I quickly get out of the car .

“Thank you, Daniel,” I say. He finally looks at me in the eye, his green ones shining in the moonlight.

Stop it, Anya. I inhale sharply. “Bye,” I say, finally. He opens his mouth to say something, but I close the door. I cannot hear his voice. I have to stay away from him for my peace. He's not good for my heart.

I walk into the building. I look back as I take a step on the staircase. He's still there in the car, gazing at me. I take in his face. He looks frustrated, like he is fighting a battle. I want to reach out and smooth the crease that has appeared on his forehead. But I will not, because my mother always says, ‘When and if it comes to choosing between you or anyone, choose yourself, because you are all you have.’ And it is said that mothers are always right.

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DANIEL

I regret yesterday. We won the match, but still, I wish yesterday didn't exist. I screwed up. I have been able to hide my desire to hold her, be with her, and not just as a friend (which I am not by the way). I can usually control my urges, but yesterday when I heard her moan over that damn milkshake, looked at her lick her lips, her tongue darting out to catch a single drop of the damn drink, it was a sight that has been burned into my brain since then. I have played in the most intense games and faced some of the toughest opponents, yet nothing compares to that.

When she looked at me, a bewildered look on her face, I wanted to pounce on her. I wanted to take her right then and there. But I didn't. I couldn't. This is not the way I want things to be. I want her all to myself, not just her body. And I don't want her to think I am just here for sex.

I ruffle my hair in frustration as I sit in the car outside her building. I want to see her, but I can't find her on campus, so here I am. The only problem is I have no appropriate reason to call her, and I can't just show up at her doorstep without any purpose; it will look weird. I pick up my phone, scroll through Instagram, and open her profile .

"I am sorry for yesterday." I speak to her picture, words I might not be able to say to her. "I talked to you roughly for starters." I rub my finger against her cheek. "And as much as I wanted to stop you, I didn't." I keep the phone in my lap. "But that's only because I didn't trust myself enough. I feel I would have done something about my situation down there, and I was not sure how you would feel about it," I explain. Not that it matters because she won't ever know.

I sigh. What am I doing? I close my eyes and rotate my neck to relieve tension from my shoulders. That's what I get for not sleeping after a match. My phone vibrates. I immediately pick it up in the hope that she might have messaged me, but I see Professor Brown's email and groan. I open it up.

My eyes widen. This feels like a blessing in disguise. I chuckle evilly. I can already imagine Anya's reaction, knowing she'll be stressed and probably anxious about the last-minute change because she is a perfectionist. But for me, this is a valid reason to reach out to her. I finally have an appropriate excuse to see her. I am so screwed. Aren't I?

I open up my contacts and dial her number. The phone rings for a while and then ends. I call her again, but she isn't picking up. I guess the avoiding game is going strong then. I don't blame her.

What should I do now? I grab the steering wheel, but her phone is unreachable. I think I should just text her and wait. What other option do I have?

Stop ignoring my calls, Firecracker. Shit has hit the fan! Our assignment submission is in two months!

I hit send, throw it on the passenger seat, and wait for her response. I know this assignment means nothing to me. Everything I am doing is for her.

I think I was enchanted the first time I saw her. She was strong-headed and bold, and then, when I finally got to know her, when she started showing her layers to me, I kept feeling drawn towards her, like a moth to the flame. And now I want to be hers. I want her to want me. And it's weird considering how easily she could crush me, and I will happily let that happen, because at least she touched me that way, at least she saw me. That's the effect she has on me. My phone buzzes. I immediately pick it up. It's her. Thank God she took the bait.

Firecracker:

I am sorry I was busy.

I just saw the email.

I look at the screen as the three dots appear and vanish in seconds, and I hate that she has to think twice before texting me. I want her to speak her mind with me.

We can meet today if you are available.

I type, hoping it doesn't make me sound desperate, which I am. After what feels like an hour—but has probably only been a few minutes—she finally responds to my message.

Firecracker:

Okay, can you come to my house?

I will send you the address.

Like I don't already know that, but I let her send it to me because I don't know the floor or apartment number. I contemplate and decide to sit in the car for five minutes, because if I went right now, it would look like I was standing right outside her door, which of course I am, but I just don't know how she will react knowing it.

I feel a mixture of excitement and nervousness as I sit in my car, waiting for the five minutes to pass. I try to keep myself occupied by playing some music and responding to some other messages on my phone. Finally, after what seems like an eternity, the five minutes are up. I take a deep breath and start my car, feeling a flutter of butterflies in my stomach as I park the car in the basement garage. I am nervous to

face her. I take the elevator up to Anya's floor, feeling my nerves grow with each passing moment. I straighten out my clothes and try to calm my breathing, hoping that I don't look too flustered.

When I reach her door, I ring the bell and wait for her to answer. There's a beat of silence, and the door opens. I stare at her. She's wearing a pair of sweatpants and an old T-shirt. Her hair is a mess, and she looks stunning. Damn, she should have mercy on me. I inhale sharply. So, she was busy with sleep, and a small smile makes its way to my face.

"Hey," she says, looking up at me apologetically. "Sorry about the mess. I wasn't expecting you so soon," she adds, avoiding my eyes.

This is either going to be fun, or I am going to screw it up more.

???

DANIEL

I fumble with the pen in my hand as I wait for her. She has gone to wash her face and bring something to eat. One thing that I have noticed since I've known her is that she loves her sleep, or more like, it's her coping mechanism. Whenever she's stressed, she starts feeling sleepy. I guess she avoids all her problems and reality through it. It makes sense.

The door creaks open as she steps into the room. Her hair is now in a tight, high ponytail, and she looks fresh as a daisy. I get up, take the plates from her hand, and set them on the table. She is being too fidgety for my liking, but I am not commenting on that, considering I am the one who made things awkward.

I think it's just the situation I should blame, because any sane straight man would be attracted to her. She's the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. The way she pulled me in instantly when I first saw her will always be a mystery to me. From the first moment, she has had all my focus. I am not in love with her, but she is beautiful and so bold. A beauty with a brain. It was intimidating at first, but when I saw her vulnerable, I just wanted to comfort her in a way no one has ever comforted her. I wanted to open up to her. I think I have. I feel comfortable with her. I guess that's her superpower: she makes people feel warm, secure enough to talk. I don't usually talk about my feelings, but with her, I want to. And it's not one way; I also want to know what's going on in her head and heart. I want her to share her deepest thoughts with me.

She pulls out her notebook from her bag, which is kept on the table. She pushes the plate toward me. "This is an Indian snack. It's called mathri in Hindi, but you can call

it..." She frowns. "Um, maybe crackers. I don't know. It sounds weird." She shrugs but doesn't look at me.

I pick it up, carefully scrutinizing it. I don't handle spice well, and one fact I know is that Indian food is spicy as hell.

"It's tolerable," she says. I look at her. She's turning pages in her notebook. Every time she moves, her hair sways slightly, drawing my attention to the way it frames her face. There's still a nervous energy emanating from her. I can't help but notice how beautiful she is.

"Shut up," she says out of nowhere. I raise my eyebrows, a small smile making its way onto my face.

"I didn't say anything, Firecracker." I state the obvious, grinning at her.

She finally looks at me, expressionless, but her cheeks are pink. "Still, shut up," she announces.

"Okay, so we have already decided that we will be making a business plan for a cafe-cum-bookstore," she says. Okay so, she's in her business mode, obviously.

"As we discussed earlier." She pushes a notebook toward me, pointing at the list of tasks we have to do, and I mentally beat myself up. Shit, I completely forgot about it, and she will be disappointed in me. I hate that look. "We're going to need to do some research, figure out the feasibility, costs, profits, potential locations, target customer base...a lot of things. I have done my side of the work. Did you find out about the target customer base?" she asks.

I sigh and give her an apologetic smile. She rolls her eyes. "Of course," she mumbles.

“In my defense, I was too busy handling the weight of the university’s expectations and being a good basketball player-slash-captain.” I shrug, smirking at her as she huffs in annoyance. “But I can make it up to you.” I wink playfully at her.

Her cheeks flush an even deeper shade of pink. Her eyes widen momentarily before she looks away, trying to compose herself. Our eyes meet for the first time today, and it almost knocks the wind out of my chest. The sunlight hits her brown eyes, enhancing their natural tones, making them appear deeper, warmer, and more vibrant. It always quickens my heartbeat.

“Don’t try to charm your way out of this,” she says, trying to sound unimpressed, but her voice is a little shaky.

“You think I am charming?” I snigger.

She blushes, looks down at her hands, and huffs. “Stop flirting with me!” she exclaims.

I inhale sharply, leaning in slightly. “I don’t think I can stop, Anya,” I say gently, my heart racing as our eyes meet. Our faces are inches apart. I can feel her breath on my lips. I take in her red cheeks. The tip of her nose is pink now, and her eyes are wide. I can feel the heat from her body.

“I genuinely don’t know why my brain goes blank when I see you. I think I’m going a little crazy,” she says, her eyes dazed.

My heart hammers against my ribcage. She’s definitely not good for my heart’s health. Her words make my head spin. My hands itch to touch her, to pull her closer, to feel her skin against mine. But I hold myself back, waiting for her response. I lean in more, expecting her to move away, but she doesn’t.

“Anya...” I say gently, my voice low and steady .

“Daniel,” she rasps out as her eyes flutter closed. The space between us feels electric. I close the distance to kiss her.

I’m a Barbie girl, in the Barbie world

Life in plastic, it’s fantastic.

What the fuck. Her eyes snap open, and she jumps back, her right hand holding her chest. Her breath quickens, and I reach out to calm her down, but she stands up before I can even touch her, as if my touch will burn her. She checks her phone. When the hell did she choose this ringtone? If we were not having this heated moment, it would be a perfect opportunity to tease her.

“It was Soph-” she pants as if she heard my inner thought. “It was a dare to set this ringtone for a day.” She looks away, avoiding my eyes. She fumbles with her phone, and the room suddenly feels cold and empty.

I sit there, heart racing, still trying to process what just happened. The kiss that didn’t happen. The moment we almost had.

“I have to take this,” Anya says, her voice shaky.

I nod numbly, unable to find the words to express my emotions. She glances at me one more time, her eyes reflecting a mix of emotions I can’t decipher. I sigh as I run a hand through my hair. I am screwed. I am down bad for her.

I genuinely don’t know why my brain goes blank when I see you. I think I’m going a little crazy.

I repeat those words in my head. I can't shake the feeling that we just had something there, something real. Those words came from within her. There was no uncertainty in her eyes. It may have been a slip of the tongue, but it felt real, the way she looked at me, her dilated pupils, her quick breaths; it was all real.

She returns to the room. "I feel we should continue this later," she says, her voice distant.

'No, let's finish this,' I almost whine. I scan her face, her expression a mix of frustration and resignation. I can see more clearly now that she likes me too, and maybe it might just be physical attraction, but I will take whatever she offers me, because I am obsessed with her, all of her. There are things I do not know about her, but the more I know, the more I feel there's a depth within her, and I want to drown in her. Every time we come a little close, something pulls us apart.

There's this huge wall she has up around herself. It's to protect her, I know, because I know she feels she's not enough; she feels she has to prove herself to others, and so I understand the need for this fortress. I also know that I do not want to force my way in. I want her to let me in. I want to do things right. I know it won't be easy, but I am not one to give up. I guess I get it from Mom. Like her, I am not a quitter.

Anya picks up the blanket and starts folding it. I want to shout out my feelings, to tell her how much she means to me, but her reaction is making it clear that this isn't the right time. It isn't just about the physical attraction; it is something deeper, something that I can't ignore anymore.

I stand up, she doesn't even look at me. The room feels heavy with unspoken words. But I know that I have to wait for the right moment.

"I'm going to talk to you tomorrow," I say softly, more to myself than to her. "When you're calm. When we're not flustered."

???

ANYA

“I have no idea why we have to attend this seminar.” Siya sighs. “I do not like to be mean, but Professor William doesn’t know what he is saying,” she adds.

Soph scoffs. “You are not being mean, babe. You are just stating facts,” she says.

“Yes. First of all, he is speaking so slowly, and his voice is sweet, so it is making me sleepy,” I say as a yawn escapes my mouth. “And secondly, he is just repeating what is written in the PPT. I mean, we could have read it on our own. At least, he could give us some real-life examples. This is so boring.” I sigh and put my head down.

“I took this seminar just so that I can get that PPT. It provides some important information related to my economics assignment,” Soph says, and I nod against the table.

This is torture, considering I couldn’t get a wink of sleep last night. All I could think about was Daniel. The almost kiss, the way the air crackled around us, the heat of his body so close to mine. My mind keeps replaying it over and over in my head. Every time I think about it, my heart rate spikes.

Normally, Daniel’s eyes are a bright, vibrant green, like a fresh, new leaf in spring. They are always full of intensity and focus, like he’s staring right through you, seeing something no one else can see. At least, I think so. But when we were face to face yesterday, when he was looking at me, his eyes roaming around my face, they darkened to almost black, like a forest at night.

I ended up watching *Girl in the Picture* on Netflix. It served its purpose, honestly. At first, I thought I should watch a Bollywood rom-com, but then I decided against romance as a genre itself. My purpose of watching anything was to distract myself from these thoughts, and crime documentaries do help, because I love to profile criminals. It is one of my hobbies. I have a whole notebook with details of all the documentaries or podcasts I have indulged in. People find it weird—honestly, I would too—but it helps me feel safe knowing I can make an educated guess on who can become a potential criminal, and I make sure to stay away from such people, which is very judgemental, but it is what it is. You gotta keep yourself safe.

“Alright, people, that is it for today,” Professor Williams announces, and the audience sighs together. I chuckle at us. We are all so similar yet so different. It’s funny and a very deep thought. It could easily keep me up till three in the morning if I start to think about it.

“Okay, I desperately need coffee,” I announce as we get up and grab our bags.

“Oh, how unpredictable,” Sophie exclaims. I roll my eyes, ignoring her comment, and walk ahead. I can hear Siya and Soph chuckle behind me, but I do not pay them any heed as I raise my middle finger.

I stomp ahead of them, stepping out of the classroom when a cup of coffee suddenly appears in front of me. My steps falter, and I frown at the unexpected gesture. “Wow, I wasn’t aware I had a coffee fairy?” I quip, looking up to find Daniel holding the cup with a small smirk.

“It’s for you,” he says, extending it closer.

My brows raise in surprise. “For me?”

He nods and I avert my gaze. Why does he have to make it so hard for me? I sigh and

quickly grab the cup and take a sip. Yup, this is heaven. I have to avoid him but I guess he knows what buttons to push. “It’s true what they say—a coffee a day, keeps grumpy away,” I mutter, more to myself than him.

Daniel chuckles. “Good to know, I’m doing a public service then.”

Just when I thought I could get through my day without thinking about him, he appears in front of me with a cup of coffee in hand. I can feel my irritation growing. I have no idea how he manages to know and emerge with my coffee at the right time.

“Hi,” he says gently. Why does he have to be so beautiful? I want to cry. Dammit .

“Hi,” I whisper back. His smile widens, and my heart skips a beat.

“Hi, Daniel!” Sophie exclaims from behind me.

“Hey,” Daniel says, I freeze, suddenly hyperaware of Sophie’s amused grin beside me. She nudges my arm gently, a knowing look in her eyes. I shoot her a warning glare, silently begging her to behave.

“We’ll wait for you,” Siya says, shaking her head at us. She’s so done with us. She’s the mother and the child of the group, if that even makes sense.

“No, I don’t—” I start, but Daniel cuts me off.

“Thank you, guys,” he says with a tight-lipped smile.

They nod and Soph gives him a thumbs-up. Whose friends are they? I am going to give them a piece of my mind later. I huff in annoyance. I take a long sip from the coffee, trying to act nonchalant. He puts his hand in his pocket.

“What do you need?” I ask .

His eyes roam around my face. “I wanted to see you,” he says with a smile.

I try to hide any reaction. “Well, you’ve seen me. You can go now.”

He takes a step closer to me, and my breath hitches. “Firecracker,” he says, his voice low and rough. I hate to admit it, but that nickname always does things to me.

“I need to talk to you about yesterday,” he says. His proximity, his intense gaze, it’s too much. I can hear my heart beat wildly.

“Anya.” He sighs, his eyes softening a bit. “I want—”

I immediately interject. “I think it was just...” I fumble as I fidget with the cold cup. “I think it just happened in the moment.” My heart thumps loudly. I look up into his green eyes. “Nothing to worry about.” I give him a small smile. He stares at me expressionless.

I look down again, unable to hold eye contact, and continue rambling. “I think I was watching a Bollywood romance movie. It’s called Chennai Express . It’s enemies-to-lovers, so the girl belongs to a very strict family, and they decide to marry her off to some goon. She doesn’t want to get married, but—” I feel his finger on my lips. My eyes widen. His touch sends a shiver down my spine. I feel heat rising in my cheeks, and I curse myself in my mind for reacting this way.

“Anya,” he murmurs. He places his thumb on my chin and makes me look up. I inhale sharply when I look at the softness in his expression. “Look at me when you’re talking.” Oh my God! Can he stop with this? I want to shout at him, but I am too enchanted to even speak.

“I just want you to know, Anya—” He starts, but I pull back again. This time, I do not break eye contact.

I chuckle painfully. “It was just a mistake. We are two grown adults. We can put this past us, captain.” I stare at him. His hand still hanging close to my face, he slowly takes it away as he clenches his jaw.

“Right?” I ask. My breath quickens. He opens his mouth and closes it. He looks at something in the background. I turn around to find my friends carefully looking at us. They are playing detectives.

“Right,” he whispers gruffly. He clenches his fists tightly, his knuckles turning white.

“Right,” I repeat, feeling dejected.

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DANIEL

As always, she's hiding from me. It's been a week since I have seen her. I hate this habit of hers. Something happens, and all she does is avoid it. She can come to talk to me, but that's too easy. We love playing hide-and-seek, obviously. Once (and if) she agrees to be with me, I am going to teach her how to communicate her feelings and not run away from them.

She can run away all she wants, but as Shahrukh Khan once said, "If you want something with all your heart, the whole universe works to bring it to you." I have been binge-watching his movies because she likes him. I want her—too much for that matter—so I hope this universe works in my favor. I want to be hers. I want to worship her in all ways. I want to be her comfort person. I want to be the man who can make her happy. I want to brighten up her day like she does mine.

It's torture now to not hold her when I have gotten a taste of it, to not see her smile or the way her eyes sparkle when she's talking about Indian food or her culture in general, the way her tongue peeks out when she's trying to concentrate on something. I've never met someone who can get under my skin like she does. It's almost maddening.

The evening breeze hits me hard, making me shudder a little. I look toward the sky. The sun is on its downward journey, painting the sky in a beautiful array of oranges, pinks, and purples. I love sunsets. My mother used to say that nature always teaches us something. And I think, considering the kind of life I am in, with so many people around me, with so much praise, it is easy to feel superior, but then such moments make me realize that you should never let your success get to your head, because

nothing is constant. Like the sun, we will also have ups and downs in life. It keeps me grounded. I take a moment to let this settle in.

“Excuse me.” A soft, feminine voice jolts me out of my thoughts. As I turn around, I immediately recognize her. She’s Anya’s childhood friend. Siya, if I am not wrong. We met on the beach. She very cunningly took my side when we were having the sandcastle-building competition. I am still grateful for that.

“Hi, um...” She’s too fidgety. She seems uncomfortable.

“Hi. Siya, right?” I ask to confirm because I wouldn’t be surprised if I mixed up names, I tend to do that a lot. It took me a whole month to remember my teammates’ names correctly when I first joined. I sigh, recalling how they deliberately called me the wrong names. My favorite and the most hilarious one was Danimal. It sounds so much like my name that I couldn’t help but cackle at it.

She nods. Her eyes wander around. I can sense she’s nervous. I decide to just stick to the point. “I am trying to find Anya. Do you know where she is? She isn’t picking up my calls or reading my messages,” I ask, raising my eyebrow.

She sighs. Her face shows signs of relief, as if she wanted me to ask her that. She plays with the keychain in her hand and lowers her head. “I have no idea why I am ditching my best friend,” she whispers and looks at me, her eyes showing genuine concern. “Um, it would be great...” She falters and looks away, and it seems like she has difficulty maintaining eye contact. “It would be great if you two realize and accept your feelings,” she says. My eyes widen. “Please stop acting like annoying idiots in love and put us all out of misery,” she says shyly. In love? Am I in love with Anya? I rub my nape.

“I am sorry for being rude,” she whispers.

“You are not being rude, Siya,” I say gently.

She looks up at me for a moment. She probably sees something that makes a small smile appear on her face. “Um...” She shifts her weight from one leg to another.

“She’s in Brew it Out , the cafe on the west side of the campus,” she says, and I hum in realization. I usually don’t have to go to that side, except when I have to meet the principal, which isn’t very often because the coach handles it for me, thankfully. Smartly played, baby, but now I know where you’re hiding. I smirk.

“Um, she’s on a date,” Siya whispers, and my smirk vanishes immediately. I see red. My hands instinctively clench into a tight fist. I know she’s not mine yet. But this anger I am feeling is dangerous. The thought of her being out with someone else is like a punch to the gut. I don’t get angry easily, but when I do, it’s difficult to handle. I try to take a deep breath and calm myself down, but it’s hard to control the possessiveness that’s taking over.

“You should hurry,” Siya mutters and looks into my eyes properly for the first time this evening. “Don’t hurt my best friend. I am trusting you to take care of her. She can be too much sometime.” She chuckles. “But she really is a very beautiful person, inside and out, always has been. She deserves the best,” she adds and plugs in her earphones. She gives me one last glance and walks away.

I can feel my heart clench at the thought of Anya on a date with someone else. The thought of her laughing, her eyes sparkling, her lips curling into that perfect smile... It should be for me. It should always be for me. I need to get to her. Right now. I need to know who this idiot is who dared to try and take her out when she’s mine. I don’t care if she doesn’t realize it yet. She’s going to. I know she likes me, too. Siya’s trust in me and her words indicate it too. If I had even a shred of doubt till now, I do not anymore.

???

ANYA

“So, when I was a kid I thought I could parachute from the loft to the first floor,” Henry says, my eyes widening in horror.

“Please tell me you didn’t,” I mutter almost pleadingly.

“Oh yes, I did. I still have a scar on my left foot,” he says and chuckles lightly.

“You were a mischievous child,” I comment. He nods vigorously, making me snigger.

“And then one other time—” He starts with another childhood story. I am so confused. There’s nothing wrong with him. I mean, normally, in romance novels—especially on Wattpad, when the female lead goes on a date with some other guy to ignore her feelings for the male lead—these guys somehow turn out to be a prick, and then the male lead appears, saving the day, and they finally confess.

But Henry is a good man, at least as of now. I mean, I should not judge so easily, especially on our first date. He’s too funny, charismatic, cute, and checks the same boxes as Ted Bundy, and I would be very disappointed if I fell into the trap of such a man considering how much I know about them. I sigh, nodding my head and smiling as if I am listening, but I am actually not because I can’t seem to stop thinking about Daniel.

I eye Henry. He’s a tall, lean, and nerdy guy, with messy brown hair that’s always slightly tousled, as if he just got out of bed. His face is angular, with a strong jawline

and a constant smirk on his lips. But it doesn't come across as cocky. Rather, it gives him a mischievous and charming appearance. His bright blue eyes sparkle with a hint of playfulness, and his lean muscles peek from underneath the soft fabric of his casual clothes. Overall, a good-looking man.

But he doesn't compare to Daniel. If he can't distract me from Daniel, God knows who can. What has he done to me? Is it black magic? No, what the hell is wrong with you? It's simple: Daniel's very attractive, and not just at superficial levels. He cares, and he is not afraid to show it. He is understanding. I don't think I have ever felt uncomfortable in his company. Every time I spend time with him, I crave more and more. I scowl.

"Any?" Henry says, his eyes laced with concern. "Are you alright?" he asks softly. I am being so pathetic. I am being unfair to a very polite man.

"Yes." I laugh awkwardly. "I tend to zone out a lot. I am sorry," I mutter munching on the fries we ordered.

"That's okay," he says, the soft smile never leaving his face. "How about you share your childhood stories now?"

"Oh no, you would run for the hills if you heard how wild I was." I chuckle.

He shakes his head. "Please, I would love some entertaining stories."

"Okay then. You asked for it." I shrug and take a sip of coffee. "So, this one time I threw my grandmother's gold earrings—" I begin, but Henry's gaze moves over my shoulder and he stops smiling.

"Any." I don't have to turn around to recognize that voice. I can identify it anywhere. It is Daniel. The only difference right now is that his voice is so cold, so

chilling.

I turn around to look at him, his tall frame blocking out the light. He's sweaty. It's as if he ran here. His expression is icy and his jaw clenches. I can feel his eyes burning into me, a wave of heat spreading through my body.

His gaze shifts to Henry and his eyes narrow. There's a dangerous glint in them, like a panther ready to pounce on its prey. I've never seen him look so intimidating before.

"Daniel, I am busy, Can we talk later?" I glare at him.

"No we can't," he says. "And you." He points his finger at Henry. "Get lost," he says, his voice too dangerous and low.

I gasp. What the hell? "Daniel, this is not a way to talk to someone," I whisper-yell. What does he think of himself? This is not at all acceptable.

"What're you doing here, Anya?" he asks, ignoring my lecture.

I put my hands on my hips. "Can't you see I am on a date?" I roll my eyes. "And anyways, it's none of your concern." I huff. Daniel chuckles darkly.

"Excuse me—" Henry says, but he is cut off by Daniel.

"Listen, dude, get lost before I lose it." I am taken aback by Daniel's words, his tone cold and menacing. I've never seen him act so aggressively, but at the same time, it's oddly ...exhilarating. This possessive, jealous side makes me happy because it's for me. He is acting this way for me. I open my mouth to respond, but he cuts me off with a scathing glare, his eyes burning into mine. A chill courses through me, and for a moment, all I can do is stand there silently, completely stunned by his intensity.

“I will leave, Anya,” Henry says, the smile on his face no longer visible.

“No, there’s no need—” But he doesn’t listen to me and walks off .

“What is your issue?” I whisper-yell. “Don’t you have any basic courtesy? Whatever you wanted from me could have waited for a while,” I say, folding my arms. “That was so disrespectful to him. This isn’t your court where everything must be run according to you—” He places a finger on my lips, and I shiver under his gaze.

“I don’t care, Firecracker,” he whispers and takes a step near me.

“I–You–” I start, trying to form a coherent sentence, but my brain seems to have malfunctioned.

Daniel takes another step closer, his chest almost touching mine. I can feel the heat radiating off his body. It’s almost intoxicating.

I push him away with all the courage left in me because I want him near me. I shouldn’t but I do. “I wasn’t done yet,” I say slowly. “You can’t just barge in and disrupt my date like this. What will he think? He was a nice guy—”

“Shut up, Anya,” he says, inhaling sharply. Daniel moves closer still, his breath hot against my cheek. “I do not fucking care what he or anyone else thinks.”

“You...you are behaving like a wild animal.” I stammer.

He ignores me and moves even closer, his body now practically pressed against mine. I suddenly feel small under his towering frame, his eyes intense and focused on me. It seems like every ounce of rationality has left my body, because I am enjoying his dominant presence that envelops me fully.

He leans in, our noses touching, and he whispers gently, "Push me away, Anya." His voice sounds strained, as if he is in pain.

"I...I should," I begin, but the rest of my sentence is lost as I look into his eyes. The way he is looking at me makes my heart drum violently against my chest. But my body betrays me. I don't push him away. Instead, I lean in even closer, my fingers lightly tracing his chest, my breathing growing more ragged as his scent fills my nostrils.

He closes his eyes. His nostrils flare. His breath is sharp and labored. He places his palm on my waist, drawing me impossibly closer, his touch possessive, demanding. With the other hand, he grabs my chin, firmly tilting my face up to look into his eyes. "Don't test my patience, Firecracker." He grunts.

As his fingers grip my chin, a mixture of desire and annoyance burns through me. I feel vulnerable, at his mercy, and in some twisted way, it turns me on.

"Fuck it. I gave you a chance," Daniel says and presses his lips against mine. My eyes widen. I gasp into the kiss, and my body immediately responds to him, leaning and melting against his muscular frame. I can feel his hand move down from my chin to my throat, the other hand still holding my waist possessively.

The kiss is rough and demanding, completely different from the soft, hesitant kisses I've shared with other guys in the past. Daniel's kiss is more like a claim, a declaration that he owns me, owns my body and soul. His tongue demands entry as his teeth graze my lips, and all thoughts of resistance are replaced by a desperate need for more.

"Mm." I moan softly, unable to stop the sound from escaping my lips. The sound fuels his hunger, and he deepens the kiss, his tongue exploring my mouth as if he's desperate to devour me whole. I feel myself getting lost in the moment, my body

responding to every touch, every movement. I moan quietly, my tongue intertwined with his in a dance of desperate need.

Daniel's grip on my throat tightens, his thumb pressing into my skin, a silent command for me to surrender. And I do, my body submitting to his command, as if it's completely out of my control.

The kiss breaks, and I find myself gasping for air, my chest heaving against him. I take a step back and pat my chest, trying to calm my erratic heartbeat. I look around. There is a group of girls giggling, and it makes me blush.

"Any," Daniel whispers, his voice thick. I can't see him; not now, at least. Because I don't trust myself around him anymore, now that I have allowed him to kiss me. Oh my god, I just kissed Daniel. I look up at him, my eyes wide. My hand flies to my mouth as I cover it and gasp. He takes a step closer to me, and I move backwards.

"No," I say. I pick up my purse, put some bills on the table, and walk away from him. I can hear Daniel follow me, but I don't turn around, and he doesn't stop me either. I am grateful for that. My mind is still so hazy. I just want to go and lie down on my bed and sleep. Or overthink. But I guess the reality is that's all I will ever be able to think about: his lips.

???

ANYA

“He kissed me,” I announce.

Soph jumps to her feet, eyes wide and a gasp on her lips. “What?!” she exclaims. People look at her. I give them an apologetic smile and pull her down.

“What are you doing?” I whisper-yell, glaring at her.

“I am sorry, but WHAT?” she mimics my tone.

“He must be really good for you to kiss him on your first date, and you forgot about your captain too, wow. I need to know everything,” she says, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. It was her idea that I should go out on a date with a hot guy who could distract me. She’s the romance expert here. Not only has she dated more than both me and Siya combined, but she also writes romance books. She has never let us read it, but I am very sure she is good at it.

“She’s talking about Daniel, Soph,” Siya says, finally closing her book and looking at me carefully. My eyes widen. It’s scary how she can even read my mind.

“How do you know?” I whisper. “Are you a psychic now?” I raise an eyebrow .

She smiles sheepishly. “Because I told him where you were,” she says, not meeting my eyes. “that you were on a date. He was searching for you desperately.”

I gasp dramatically. Soph rolls her eyes, watching us intently. “Why would you do

that? Do you know what a scene he—”

“I don’t know that, but I did it for you, Anya,” Siya says quietly but firmly, still avoiding my eyes. I wait for her to explain her logic because I would really like to know. “I am sure you know it too, that you like him,” she says, her dark brown eyes turning amber as sunlight hits them. “The poor man has been trying to tell you how he feels about you. Why are you ignoring him, Anya?” she asks.

I stare at her, my mouth parted slightly. “What are you talking about?” I try to play it cool. But she doesn’t answer. Soph stares at me expressionless, so I sigh, taking a sip of my black coffee, my face twisting in disgust. God knows how he drinks it and why I ordered it.

“I am afraid,” I admit, putting the mug down.

“Of what?” Soph asks as she eyes me carefully.

“He gets me. He understands me too well,” I say. “He knows when I need silence.” I look out of the window. “Or when I want to rant.” I turn around to face them. “He learned my coffee order, you know.” I chuckle. I feel a lump in my throat. “I just automatically feel better when I see him. I find ways to see him.” I feel my eyes burning.

Siya keeps her hand on mine. “That’s a good thing, you know.”

I nod. “I want to be with him,” I say. “But what if he realizes that I am not enough? He makes me feel visible.” I chuckle humorlessly. “At least, for now. He can have anyone he wants, so what if he doesn’t like me when he finally sees the entire me, the filter-less me?”

Soph scoffs. “Are you kidding me?” She shakes her head. “He looks at you like he

can't believe you exist. Like you are the only star in his sky." I inhale sharply. I feel my stomach flutter at her words.

"What?" I whisper.

She pulls her phone out of her pocket, scrolling a little as her eyes scan the screen, and a sly smile appears on her lips. She glances at me and lifts her phone to show me a picture of Daniel and me. It's from the beach. When we had the sandcastle-making competition.

"Do you see it? His eyes are sparkling. Look at how happy you guys seem," she says, a gentle smile playing on her lips, and I can't fathom what I am looking at.

"He likes you, Anya. He likes you so much," Siya says. Soph nods, bobbing her head as she picks up a fry and munches on it.

"Don't run away anymore, babe," Soph says, her eyes not leaving mine.

"It's okay to try, right?" Siya smiles and I realize she approves of him. It means a lot because she isn't open to new people. She has social anxiety, so she runs away from strangers, but if she supports it, it means she sees something genuine. She would never want me to get hurt. I feel I am more hurt while being away from him. What if it works out? What if he still likes me when he sees the real me?

I suddenly feel breathless. I am speechless. As if on cue, Daniel walks in through the door. Call me delusional, but that's a sign, right?

As I watch him walking toward us, my heart starts racing and my palms are sweating. But Siya's squeeze of encouragement grounds me.

Daniel comes to a stop in front of the table. His eyes rake over me. It's as if he can

see through me. Maybe he can. But there's no judgment visible in his eyes.

"Hey," he says, his voice low and velvety.

I feel a shiver run down my spine as his voice registers in my head, my body subconsciously leaning towards him.

"Hey," I manage to croak out, my voice betraying my attempt to sound casual.

"Can I steal her for a while?" He glances at my friends, his gaze lingering on Siya for a second longer before he looks back at me.

"Of course!" Soph grins.

I do not protest this time. I get up and push the chair under the table as I walk beside him. He doesn't say anything. I hate the crease on his forehead. He looks tired, and if I am the reason, I want to punish myself. People stare at us, but he doesn't seem to be bothered by that. He is used to it.

Thankfully, when he shoved his tongue down my throat, there weren't many people around except the cafe staff, because otherwise, it would have gone viral, and I hate attention, especially from strangers. And since he is a known figure, people will make everything a big deal. I am never going back to that cafe ever again.

Daniel leads the way out of the cafe, the soft breeze from the outside playing with his hair. His hand brushes against mine, an electric current passing through the brief contact. For a second, I wish he would take my hand in his, but he doesn't. We're both silent as the door shuts behind us. He continues walking without a word, heading towards a park nearby.

Once we reach the park, Daniel leads me toward a secluded spot under a tall oak tree.

The leaves of the tree cast shadows on the ground, the sunlight filtering through them in a mesmerizing way. The sound of birds chirping fills the air, adding a natural soundtrack to the silence between us.

“I hate it when you avoid me, you know,” he says, his voice firm but gentle. He leans against the trunk of the tree, looking at his shoes. “You act so brave.” He shakes his head. “Correction.” He looks up, his expression unreadable. “You are brave, yet you run away from me.”

He pushes himself away from the tree and takes a step towards me, his gaze intense. The sunlight casts a golden hue on his skin, making his eyes sparkle. He stops when he’s close enough that I can feel his body heat.

“You push me away,” he says, his voice barely above a whisper. “And it just—”

He pauses, visibly struggling to find the right words. He rakes a hand through his hair, messing up the perfect strands, but the slight imperfection only seems to make him more attractive.

“About the other day, Anya—” he says and puts a finger on my lips as if I am going to interrupt him. My eyes widen, taken aback by his action. “No, it was not. It did not happen in the moment,” he continues, taking his hand back. He looks into my eyes. Dazed.

“Why did you kiss me then, Daniel?” I whisper.

Sighing loudly, he reaches out and gently takes my hand in his, his calloused thumbs tracing soothing circles on my skin.

“Because I was jealous,” he admits.

The simple touch of his hand, his thumb rubbing circles on my skin, is scrambling my brain and sending my pulse into overdrive. “Jealous?” I manage to ask.

He nods. “You have no idea how long I’ve been holding back. The first second I saw you, I couldn’t get over how beautiful you were,” He says, his voice low and laced with a conviction that takes me off guard. “And then I got to know you. Thank god for that awful assignment.” He chuckles. “I have attended every single lecture on the subject because I wanted to see you, Anya. I did not even realize when making you laugh became so important to me.” His eyes hold so much sincerity, my heart does a cartwheel. “And he was making you laugh, so easily. I was just very angry.”

I can feel my breath hitching as he speaks, his words sending a wave of warmth through me.

“What I am trying to say here, Anya, is that...” He looks into my eyes, and I almost gasp seeing the raw emotions swirling in them. “This is the worst way to do it. You deserve better, but I need you to know it.” Unable to hold eye contact, I look down at my feet.

He steps closer to me and kneels, my eyes widening. Oh my god. Is he proposing? But why would he? That would be just too much. “What are you doing, Daniel?!” I exclaim.

“You are not looking at me, and I won’t talk if you do not meet my eyes,” he says, a small smile playing on his lips.

“I am not the best man out there. I admit it. And you deserve the best.” His smile only widens. “But I promise to do anything and everything to be who you deserve. So, if you will let me—” he inhales deeply, and so do I. “--can I be your boyfriend?”

I stand there in disbelief, my heart pounding in my chest. He’s kneeling before me,

looking up at me with so much vulnerability and sincerity in his eyes. I can feel tears prickling at the corners of my eyes as the weight of his words weighs over me. This feels so official. My mind is reeling, struggling to process his proposal. He wants to be my boyfriend? It's something I've thought about, but I never dared to hope for it. And now, he's here, asking me if I would let him. Not if I can be his girlfriend, but if I can allow him to be my boyfriend.

I try to find the right words, but my throat feels constricted. He gets up and holds my hand. His palms are sweaty. "Please say something, Fire—" I think it's enough running for now. I am going to take a chance. I slam my lips on his.

He freezes, surprise etched on his face. But the shock doesn't last long as he quickly recovers from the surprise and responds to my kiss. One hand cups my cheek, the other wrapping around my waist, pulling me closer, his body pressing against mine. This kiss is unlike the kiss from the other day in the cafe. It's soft and gentle, yet passion burns beneath it. It seems as if he has been waiting to do this for quite some time, and it excites me to know that he's been holding back his feelings just for me.

He pulls away slightly, a breathless laugh escaping his lips as he looks at me with a dazed expression. "Is that a yes?" he asks, his eyes searching mine.

I roll my eyes, pretending to be unfazed even though my heart is doing somersaults. "What do you think, genius?" I raise an eyebrow as I smirk. He shakes his head, but a huge grin adorns his face, which makes me smile wider. He gets up and eyes me.

"I think that's very much a yes, but could you say it for me? I need to hear it," he says and pokes my nose.

"Yes, Daniel." I look up at him. "I will allow you to be my boyfriend." He laughs, the sound of his happiness filling the air. It is as if a weight has been lifted from his shoulders, as if a burden he had been carrying for far too long has suddenly been

lifted. As he pulls away from our embrace, his eyes remain fixed on mine, an affectionate smile still tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“You have no idea how happy I am right now, Firecracker,” he says, still grinning uncontrollably.

“I think I really like making you smile,” I say as I hug him again.

???

DANIEL

I am going on a date with Anya. My girlfriend. Fucking finally. I think I look creepy considering I can't stop smiling at all. Coach was so done with me today at practice. I am just grateful he didn't kick me out. I do not think I have ever been this happy. As her building comes into view, I spot her almost immediately.

There she is, looking so divine. Her hair cascades down her shoulders in soft waves, catching the sunlight in just the right way. Her top includes a modest sweetheart neckline that reveals just the right amount of cleavage and capped sleeves that show off the smoothness of her skin. She looks like she just stepped out of a painting. She looks up from her phone, and when she notices me, a small smile appears on her face.

I quickly get out of the car to open her door. "I can do it on my own," she says. So typical of her.

I chuckle. "I know you can." I open the car door anyway. "But you cannot deny me the pleasure of treating my girlfriend right, okay? "

Anya rolls her eyes at me, her lips curling into an amused smile. "You're such a gentleman," she says sarcastically, but there is a hint of fondness in her voice. I run to the driver's side as she gets in and buckles up.

"Now, can I know where we are going?" She folds her hands over her chest and raises an eyebrow as she scrutinizes me.

I start the car and pull away from the curb, glancing over at her from the corner of my

eye. “Nope, it’s a surprise,” I say, a cocky grin on my face. “You’ll just have to trust me.”

She huffs and blows out a raspberry. I laugh out loud. I continue to drive, enjoying the comfortable silence between us. Every now and then, I steal glances at her, my gaze drifting to her legs, her hair, her lips. It’s still hard to believe that she’s sitting right next to me and that she is my girlfriend. My girlfriend.

“You look beautiful, by the way,” I say casually. I frown, realizing what I just said. “Sorry, you are beautiful, always.” Her eyes sparkle as she gives me a small smile.

I gradually put my hand on her thigh. As soon as my hand touches her thigh, I can feel the heat emanating from her. She doesn’t seem to mind the contact and continues to look out of the window. “You know, I’ve been waiting a long time to do this,” I say, my voice low and deep. My fingers begin to move mindlessly, tracing small circles on her leg. “Just being able to touch you...It feels incredible.” I laugh softly. “Well, I did touch you occasionally, but there was always this fear that you would kill me.”

She chuckles. “I would.” She turns to face me. “If it was someone else, I would have.” My heart nearly leaps out of my chest. I clear my throat. I should focus on driving. It is difficult, but I do not want us to get killed.

“You seriously won’t tell me where we are going?” she asks again, disbelief lacing her voice. I laugh and accelerate on the slope .

“You’re unbelievable,” she says.

“And you’re very pretty,” I say. She scoffs but her cheeks redden, and I love the sight. I smirk, shifting her gaze back to the street as she looks away. “You know, you look even more beautiful when you blush like that,” I tease, glancing at her from the

corner of my eye.

She turns to look at me, her eyes narrowing in annoyance. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” she asks, her voice edged with irritation.

I pull the brakes and look at her. “Absolutely.” I grin. “And we are here,” I announce, getting out of the car. I open her door and extend my hand, which she takes. I pull her out, closing the door behind her.

She gasps as she looks around, and I can’t help but smile. She looks at me. “This.” She looks between the scenery and me. “This is from the scene in My Name Is Khan !” Her eyes sparkle, and a wide smile adorns her face. Seeing the excitement in her eyes and the way her face lights up with joy is a sight to behold. I knew this would hit home and I am glad that she loves it.

“Wait a minute.” She gapes at me. “Did you actually watch those movies I recommended?” she asks in a hushed tone.

I rub my nape and smile sheepishly. “Well, I had to.” I look at her. “You recommended them after all.” I chuckle softly. “I have a confession to make though.” I bend slightly to maintain eye level. “I may have had to pause a few times to figure out what was happening.”

When I first saw the scene, I was awestruck. It must have been one of the best proposal scenes I have ever witnessed. This isn’t a proposal obviously, but I want our first date to be memorable. It took me only minutes to find this location, but it took me days to find a secluded spot. I just felt she would love it and we can view the sunset from here. Her eyes widen with amazement as she takes in the stunning scene around her. The setting sun casts a warm glow over the landscape, painting the sky in a beautiful array of oranges, reds, and purples. The gentle breeze is punctuated by the occasional bird call, adding to the peaceful beauty of the moment.

She gazes at me for a moment before her face breaks into a wide smile. I don't know what's happening until she throws her arms around me. "This is really very beautiful, captain," she whispers.

Her sudden embrace catches me off guard, but I quickly recover and wrap my arms around her, pulling her closer to me. Her head rests on my chest, and I place my chin on top of her head, inhaling the lavender scent of her hair. "I'm glad you like it," I murmur, my breath fluttering against her ear. "I wanted this to be special for you, Firecracker."

"Thank you," she mutters. I look down at her. Her eyes are closed, and she looks so serene. I grin and peck her nose.

"This is so much more gorgeous in real life, isn't it?" she says, resting her chin on my chest to look up at me. I nod and smile.

"Come on. I will spread out the blanket," I say. She follows me to the car. I spread the blanket on the grass, and we both sit down on it, side by side, facing the gorgeous view in front of us. The golden light of the setting sun bathes the world in a warm glow, and the distant city lights glimmer like stars. I take a deep breath, savoring the cool evening air.

She watches me intently as I open the picnic basket. Guess someone's hungry. I take out three containers, opening them. "I hope you don't mind, but I bought, umm ..." I falter. "Gol gappe ?" I tilt my face. I hope I said it right.

"What the—?" she exclaims. "What are you trying to do?" She narrows her eyes at me.

"Um..." I frown. "Do you not like it?" I panic. "I don't know. I asked Siya, and she told me you love it, and so—" Disappointment bubbles within me. "I am sorry," I

whisper .

“Are you insane?” she yells. My eyes widen at her outburst. “I love it. I am sorry. I was just taken aback. No one has ever put in so much effort for me, captain,” she whispers, “I don’t even want to thank you because that would be disrespectful to your thoughtfulness.”

I silently observe her as she stares at the containers. “You never have to thank me for anything.” I utter. “And I am not being thoughtful. I want to do this for you.” I gently graze her hand with mine. “And not just now, not just because I am trying to impress you.” I chuckle. “I will always be like this. I will always be trying to impress you, so it’s better you get used to it.” I grin.

She looks at me, her face expressionless, and then she beams. “Okay.”

“Can we please have it now?” she asks impatiently, rubbing her hands.

“Alright, alright.” I snigger. “Let’s not keep you waiting any longer, my Firecracker,” I tease.

I open the containers, and before she can pick up a puri , I pull the box away. “I have an idea.” I smirk. “How about we compete?”

She raises an eyebrow. “You are saying you want to compete with me in a gol gappe eating challenge?” She smiles smugly. “You sure you want to do that, captain? Because this will be impossible for you to win.”

I chuckle. “Someone said the same thing last time.” She narrows her eyes at me. It’s so easy to get under her skin.

“This is my area of expertise,” she says confidently. “But the question here is...” She

pokes my chest with her finger. “What will the winner get?” she asks.

“The loser will have to do one thing that the winner wants. It can be anything. I am warning you.” I cock my eyebrow .

“Bring it on,” she says as she narrows her eyes and I smirk.

We sit facing each other, a box of gol gappas in between us. I follow her hand movements and fill the puri with the potato stuffing like she does and add the green water in it. We make a few pieces and place it in the plate before we begin the competition.

“Let’s start.” She says excitedly. I pop a puri into my mouth, the crisp exterior cracking and the tangy and spicy filling and water exploding in my mouth with every bite I take. Anya giggles as she moves on to her second puri and my heart dances with happiness inside my chest.

My breath hitches as I see a drop of water trickling down her lips, slowly moving down the contour of her chin and then disappearing below. I want to lick that water off her lips, to feel the softness of her mouth. I watch her as her tongue comes out to her lips to wipe it off. The memory of what her tongue is capable of makes me feel hot, but I can not think about that right now.

I shake my head slightly, trying to focus on anything else. Except the heat isn’t just in my thoughts—it’s real and it’s overwhelming. I swipe at my forehead. Am I sweating? A single tear might’ve escaped my eye as well, courtesy of the fiery spice. My spice tolerance? Nonexistent. Why did I think I could keep up with her?

Still, looking at Anya, I wonder if she’s faltering, too. Her eyebrows scrunch slightly, and she hiccups softly before taking the next bite, her lips parting just enough to blow on it, trying to cool down the heat. She’s trying to mask it, but I know her well

enough to see through the act. At least I'm not suffering alone.

"Looks like I am winning, captain." She chuckles and I smirk, watching as she hastily pops a puri into her mouth.

"Don't be so sure of yourself just yet, Firecracker," I retort with a mouthful of food. "I never give up."

We maintain eye contact for a beat and I smile smugly as her speed slows down immensely. "Don't overdo it, Firecracker," I suggest even as my mouth burns from the spice. "I will go easy on you. Don't worry." I really hope she stops being stubborn and gives up because if she doesn't in two more minutes, I will. Moreover, I do not want to get her sick.

When she picks up another puri, I give up. "Fine," I say, lying down. "You win." I groan. Her face lights up and she lies down next to me, panting. I close my eyes, soaking up the moment. I grab her hand and place it on my chest. This feels good.

"What do I have to do?" I ask as I turn towards her. She smiles and stands up. "Will you dance with me?" She asks, extending her hand towards me.

I tilt my face in confusion, "What? I-I—" I begin to protest.

"C'mon," She pleads. "It will be fun." With a sigh, I take her hand and get up. I stand behind her as she looks ahead, her back against my chest. The sun has almost disappeared, and the moon is now visible in the sky. It's a full moon, casting a soft glow all around us.

I start swaying from side to side. "Just...relax." She mutters

"Did you know?" she asks. Her smile is audible in her voice, and I rest my head

against hers.

“What?” I whisper as I close my eyes, exhaling deeply.

“We just recreated a scene from Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi . It is—” I do not let her complete her sentence and interrupt her in between.

“One of your favorite Shahrukh Khan movies, I know.” I finish her sentence.

She gasps and turns around in my hold, now facing me. “So you have watched that one, too?” she asks. I chuckle and nod.

She narrows her eyes and then slowly smiles. “You’re unbelievable,” she murmurs. “Stop staring.” She swats my chest.

I scoff. “You’re staring too, you know,” I say as I narrow my eyes at her playfully.

She looks away, her ears turning red. “No, I am not,” she mumbles.

“Are you blushing?” I tease, a wide smile playing across my lips. “You look adorable,” I say, chuckling softly.

“I am going to kill you,” she mutters. The way she is avoiding my gaze is incredibly cute.

I gently grab her chin, forcing her to look up. Her eyes widen, and her breathing turns shallow. I lean closer, my breath brushing against her cheek. “No, you’re not,” I whisper and kiss her cheek.

I straighten up to look into her eyes. “I am staring because I like seeing you happy.” I smile. “It looks good on you,” I add.

The cool evening breeze plays with her wavy hair, making it flutter around my fingers. Her flushed cheeks from the spicy food contrast against the darkness, and it's a sight to behold. But I can't help but get lost in her eyes, the moonlight reflecting in them, causing them to sparkle. They look brighter and more beautiful than ever before, making me smile.

I watch as she bites her lips, suddenly becoming all shy. It's adorable. She looks away, her fingers nervously fiddling with my t-shirt. Her touch is so gentle, like she's afraid to go too far. I love this side of her. She's usually so sassy and reserved; this side makes me feel close to her, like she is letting me in. She is letting me see herself like this, and I do realize it isn't easy for her, so it makes me more grateful.

"Shut up," she murmurs, her fingers pinching my arm.

I let out an exaggerated gasp and feign hurt. "That hurt." She mocks a smile at me and I laugh loudly.

???

ANYA

I nod at the security guard and he smiles back as I enter the building. Daniel is standing right next to him, his hands in his pockets. He looks too attractive in those gray sweatpants. I look him up and down, taking in the sight of him in his casual clothes. His hair is tousled, falling haphazardly on his forehead, and his face is still flushed from the cold shower he was talking about in his text. He had mentioned he liked taking a cold shower after his matches as it helped loosen the soreness from the muscles, and I wanted to say, ‘I could give you a massage,’ but I held back. That’s just too much right now, I guess.

His face lights up as he looks at me and a broad smile forms on his face. He walks towards me, his arms outstretched to pull me in a hug.

“Hey,” he whispers, his breath against my ear. The familiar scent of his cologne envelops me, and my heart rate instantly picks up.

I bury my face in his chest, wrapping my arms around his waist. He squeezes me tighter and rubs my back softly, his tall build surrounding me.

Daniel pulls back slightly, his hand sliding down my forearm as he gets a hold of mine. “You are pretty,” he murmurs, his eyes roaming over my face.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I tease, giving him a smirk. His hand is warm against mine as he pulls me toward the staircase. I tug at it as if I could possibly stop him. “I am not a big fan of exercising, captain,” I whine. “I am not going to climb twelve floors.” I glare at him.

“Um...” Daniel begins but then stops. He opens and shuts his mouth at least three times. “I moved,” he finally says, smiling sheepishly at me. “To the first floor,” he adds.

“When?” I frown. “And why? Your apartment had a wonderful view,” I comment.

His face falls. “I just—” He sighs. “I did not want a repeat of last time.”

I tilt my face in confusion, and then it hits me: he’s talking about the panic attack I had when I was stuck in the elevator.

“You moved so that I do not have to use the elevator?” I ask carefully.

Daniel’s face turns red. “Yeah,” he says in a quiet voice, his eyes still fixed on me. “I could not risk you getting stuck in that goddamn elevator again.” His words surprise me, my heart skipping a beat at the thoughtfulness behind his action. “I hate the look of fear in your eyes. It doesn’t suit you,” he says, his voice sharp. “And me and my roommates decided to move to a smaller flat to cut costs.” He rushes out.

No one has ever been this careful or mindful of my fears and triggers before. I mean my family has always supported me, been there for me when I needed them, but no one has ever put in so much effort just for my comfort. My heart aches at the thought of him being this considerate. I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face at his words. “Thank you,” I say softly, my voice thick with emotion. “You didn’t have to do that for me, you know.”

He smiles. “I know, but I wanted to,” he says and pulls me to the staircase. “Don’t make a big deal out of it because really, it’s the least I could do. Okay?” he says, grinning at me.

I nod, feeling a wave of emotions wash over me. We climb the stairs in silence, the

sound of our footsteps echoing off the walls. Daniel opens the door to his apartment, gesturing for me to step inside. I step into the room, my gaze flickering around the space. The apartment is spacious, with large windows that let in the last remnants of sunlight.

“This is nice,” I murmur, looking around the living room. “Somehow better than the last one.” I smile as I look up at him. He kisses my hair and wordlessly guides me deeper into the apartment. We enter the kitchen. It smells nice, and as if on cue, my stomach rumbles.

“Sounds like someone’s hungry,” Daniel teases, a playful smile on his face. “I made spaghetti for us.” He takes my hand and leads me over to the counter, pulling out a stool for me to sit on. We had planned to go out, but then I had a sleepover with the girls. We have been doing it since the first semester. I told him if we go out, I will be too tired and end up sleeping, so he just invited me over. I thought we would relax, but I guess he went all out and cooked for me. I smile at him as I perch on the stool, my stomach rumbling again as the aroma of the spaghetti wafts toward me.

Daniel begins to ladle the spaghetti onto two plates before placing them on the counter next to the stools. He hands me a plate, and I take a bite, savoring the rich, flavorful sauce.

“This is good,” I say between mouthfuls. “You’re a great cook.”

He grins, visibly pleased by my compliment.

“Last time I ate spaghetti, I couldn’t stop puking for a week,” I say.

His eyes widen in concern.

I laugh. “Don’t worry; I ate from that questionable place behind campus. Cheap food

isn't always a win."

He shakes his head, setting down his fork. "You really don't think things through sometimes, do you?"

I blink at him, caught off guard. "Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence."

"I'm serious, Anya. You're always running yourself into the ground—classes, assignments. When was the last time you just stopped to take care of yourself?"

His words hit too close to home, and I glance down at my plate. "I'm fine, Daniel. People manage worse. I'm just busy, that's all."

"You say that, but..." He sighs, leaning forward on his elbows. "You act like you've got it all under control, but anyone paying attention can see how much you're carrying. You don't have to do everything alone, you know."

I pause mid-bite, caught off guard by the conviction in his voice. He stares at me for a moment, his gaze unwavering.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I mutter, trying to keep the conversation light.

"Yes, you do," he counters softly. His hand reaches over, and his thumb gently swipes a bit of sauce from the corner of my mouth. His touch lingers for just a second too long, and I feel my face heat.

"You're too smooth for your own good, you know that?" I say, hoping to distract myself from how flustered I am.

"You think I am smooth?" He leans back, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "I'll

take it as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t,” I shoot back with a smirk.

He stares at me, his eyes not leaving mine and a small smile plays at his lips. “I mean it, baby.” He cocks his head. “You do not have to go through everything alone. We are in this together and all your burdens, your worries are mine, too. Do you understand?” He raises an eyebrow .

I can't help but beam. “Yes sir.” I mock a salute.

“Good girl.” He winks at me and I shake my head.

“Dude, this smells nice.” I turn around to see the owner of the voice.

Daniel grabs the plate quickly. “Louis, don’t.” He glares.

“Hi, there.” Louis waves at me, and I give him a small smile. He looks between Daniel and me, and smirks as he takes a seat next to me.

“I have to file a complaint, Ms. Anya,” he says, faking a serious expression, but I can see the playful smile he’s trying to hide. Daniel rolls his eyes.

“I have no idea what you did to my brother.” He pats Daniel’s arm. “But this man is whipped.” He sighs. “It is so difficult to be around him.” Louis fake-shivers and faces Daniel. “He keeps smiling. It is very spine-chilling.”

“Whipped, huh?” I say to Daniel, raising an eyebrow.

Daniel shrugs, a smug smile on his face. “Can you blame me?” He looks at Louis with a bored expression on his face. “But come on, dude. You are overdoing it,” he

says, a blush rising on his neck. He looks so cute.

“No, he is not,” Ethan says as he walks out of a room—probably his. “He’s a goner for you; believe me,” he exclaims, facing me again. I snigger.

“That I am. I cannot deny that.” Daniel winks at me. His friends groan and I chuckle.

“Shut up,” Daniel says, smiling at them. I laugh, enjoying the playful banter between us all. This is fun. I might as well gang up on him.

I smirk. “So, guys.” I gulp down the food. “Since you were complaining about Daniel’s—” I pause trying to find the right words. “---I would say exaggerated behavior.” I smile at him slyly. “I would really love to know some incidents.”

Louis leans in his chair. Ethan and Louis exchange a glance before grinning at Daniel’s horrified expression. “Firecracker.” He gasps. “You do not have to join them!”

I can’t help but laugh at his reaction. “I’m just being curious, captain,” I tease, sipping on my water.

Ethan and Louis can barely contain their excitement. “This is going to be epic.” Ethan rubs his hands together, a mischievous smile on his face. He’s so different than he was on the beach. He seems more comfortable and open here. Daniel groans, sinking in his chair.

“So before you guys started dating, he was trying to learn how to make your coffee order,” Louis says and pats Daniel’s back, who in turn gives him a death glare. My heart races as I remember how he not only knows my coffee order by heart but can also prepare it.

“Yeah, and he went through a whole trial-and-error process. I swear he must have made twenty cups before he got it right,” Ethan chimes in.

“It was not as bad, but the issue was he made the two of us try your coffee order at least fifty times.” Louis sighs. “I had to work extra to lose all those calories. God knows how you drink that much sugar.”

“I stayed at a friend’s place because I was so scared of him. I haven’t drank coffee since then.” Ethan pulls a face and I can’t help but chuckle.

“I left the house before he could even wake up,” Louis says as he slurps his spaghetti.

“I made Sam try it then.” Daniel laughs. “He’s the security guard,” he explains to me.

I nod, intrigued. “And what did Sam think about it?” I ask, taking another bite of my spaghetti.

Daniel grins. “He said it tasted like a unicorn barfed in a cup!”

I snort, almost choking on my food. I cover my mouth, realizing that isn’t a great way to laugh, especially around his friends, but the way Daniel is looking at me makes it clear he doesn’t care. Ethan and Louis burst out laughing, too.

“I had no other options, so I started drinking your order myself and I tried and tested until I thought it was perfect.” Daniel chuckles as he looks at me. His eyes seem so soft right now.

“This is only one example. We can go on actually,” Louis says.

“Any, don’t you think it’s time for you to go?” Daniel says as he stares at the clock behind me.

I gasp, taken aback. “You want me gone?” I whisper.

His eyes widen, and he shakes his head furiously. “That’s not what I—” He quickly grabs my hand. “I thought you had girls’ night tonight. You were talking about what you were going to do. It starts in an hour, so I thought—” He shakes his head again. “I am so sorry.”

I look at my watch and stand up. “You are right!” I whisper-yell. I turn back to look at the guys. I smile. “I will see you guys around.” I mock a bow. “I hope I don’t make your lives more miserable.” They chuckle and wave at me.

“I will drop you off at your place,” Daniel says.

I frown at him. “There is no need. I will take a cab.”

He shakes his head. “No, I am heading out so I will drop you off.”

“Where are you going?” Ethan asks, a smirk visible on his face.

Daniel glares at him. “None of your business,” he says. His friend raises his hands in surrender.

“Okay.” I say, smiling at him. He’s so obvious, but who am I to say anything? I mean, I will get to spend more time with him.

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DANIEL

“Is that my scrunchie you have on your wrist, captain?” she asks. “I have been looking for it. When did you steal it?” She frowns as she eyes my hand.

I laugh. “I did not steal it, firecracker.” I brush her hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ear. “You left it at my place.”

Her breath hitches slightly. Her eyes follow my hand’s movement, and I feel a swell of satisfaction. “Oh,” she says. Her voice is soft. There’s something so captivating about her in this moment—the way her usual fiery demeanor melts into something gentler, more vulnerable.

“Well, can you return it to me now?” she asks, avoiding my eyes as a blush rises up her cheeks, making me grin.

“Okay.” I smile as I take it off my wrist and extend it to her. Before she can snatch it from my hand, I pull her into my embrace. I inhale the scent of her hair as I pat her head. She slowly hugs me back. “Your hair is so soft.” I sigh.

“Don’t say things like that!” She swats my chest and tries to pull away, but I hold her in her place so that she doesn’t get hurt from the study table.

“Why?” I whisper in her ear, gently nibbling her earlobe. She shudders under my touch.

“It...” She stutters. “It gives me butterflies.” She hides her face in my chest.

I chuckle, gently running my fingers through her hair. “Looks like I will have to do it more then,” I state. She huffs. I look at the family photo she has on her table and adore the little pigtails her younger self has; she definitely looks like her mother.

“I have something for you,” I say as I pull back a little to look into her eyes.

“Something for me?” she asks, her eyes widening slightly, a mixture of curiosity and anticipation in her gaze. I can see the way she’s trying to maintain her composure, but the hint of excitement in her gaze betrays her.

I nod. “Close your eyes,” I say, my voice firm yet gentle. Her eyelids flutter shut and I reach into my pocket, taking out a small jewelry box and opening it.

“You can open it now,” I say softly.

Anya opens her eyes. They widen slightly as she sees the jewelry box. Her gaze flits from the box to my face. “You bought jhumkas for me?” she exclaims.

“Eh?” I twist my face in confusion. “What does that word mean?” I question. “Jh —” I try to pronounce it. “Jhumka ?” I have successfully butchered it. It sounds like gibberish coming from my mouth.

A small giggle escapes her lips. “They’re earrings,” she says. “But not just any earrings. They’re traditional Indian earrings.” She adds. “I did not bring many because I don’t get to wear Indian clothes that much here, except if I am visiting a temple, which is also rare.” I love how excited she gets when she is talking about India.

“Why did you buy them though?” she asks, peering intently at me.

“Oh.” I scratch my neck. “I was stalking you on Instagram. I saw some old posts.

You look pretty in Indian attire, I must say,” I confess.

Her mouth falls open. “Oh shit!” She covers her face with her hands. “I am so embarrassed. I really need to delete those posts,” she remarks.

I frown, taken aback by her reaction. “Why would you say that?”

Anya looks at me and hesitates, her hand still covering her face, but she peeks out from behind her fingers. “It’s just... they’re old pictures and I look so cringe in them,” she explains, biting on her bottom lip.

I chuckle, taking her hand in mine. “I have to make some things clear, I guess.” I narrow my eyes at her. “I will not hear anyone talk shit about my girlfriend.” I pull her forcefully towards me, and she crashes into my chest. Her breath hitches. “Not even you. Keep that in mind,” I say sternly as I bend down and peck her cheek.

“I just—” Before she can complete her sentence, I put a finger on her lips.

“I am very serious, Anya.” I glare at her. She studies my face for a moment and then smiles at me softly.

“Okay,” she breathes out. “Can you help me put them on?”

“Of course, Firecracker,” I say, my voice gentle. “Turn around for me, baby,” I whisper in her hair.

Her body visibly trembles as I run my fingers across her neckline. I can feel the heat radiating from her skin, the soft hitch in her breath. I can feel her pulse quicken under my touch, a steady thrum against my fingertips. “Stay still for me, Firecracker,” I murmur in her ear, my voice low and husky. “Let me put these on you.” I suppress a smirk, loving the way she responds to my touch. I take the earrings gently in my

hands.

I gently thread the earrings through her earlobes, careful not to pull too hard. The soft metal against her skin gleams, the earrings catching the light beautifully. Leaning in, I press a gentle kiss onto the curve of her neck. Her skin is soft and warm under my lips.

She lets out a soft moan as my lips press against her skin. She tilts her head to the side, giving me more access to her skin. I can feel her body leaning into me, her muscles slackening under my touch. “You look absolutely beautiful with those earrings,” I whisper against her skin, my hands still on her shoulders. “Open your eyes, Anya,” I command.

Her eyes flicker open, a mixture of arousal and admiration in her gaze. Her cheeks are flushed, the heat radiating off her skin. She attempts to speak, but the words seem to get stuck in her throat. I turn her around so she can face me. Her gaze is fixed on my face. I reach out, gently tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

I lean down, biting her lower lip. Her body involuntarily leans toward mine. Anya’s breath quickens as my teeth graze her lower lip, and my hands trace patterns on her jawline. “You’re so beautiful,” I murmur, my voice low and gruff. My fingers dance along her collarbone, tracing the curves of her body through the thin material of her shirt.

She pants as I cup her right breast. My other hand is still on her neck, holding her in place. Her body feels warm and soft under my touch, the thin material of her shirt not doing much to hide her shape.

I continue exploring her body with my hands, enjoying the way she responds to me. “You’re so responsive. It’s driving me wild,” I say, my hands moving down to her hips, pulling her closer to me, if that’s even possible.

“You want me to kiss you, baby?”

Anya’s response is a gentle nod, a quiet admission of her needs and desires. “Yes.” She breathes out, her words almost strangled by the thickness in her voice.

“Ask nicely, Firecracker.” I smirk. Her gaze locks with mine, desire and need reflecting in her eyes. I can almost hear her thoughts, her dilemma of submitting to her needs or maintaining her stubbornness. She doesn’t like to ask for things. She doesn’t believe in requesting. She’s too proud of a woman, and I love every bit of it, but I want her to know there’s no shame in fulfilling her needs, even if that means she has to ask me for it. I love seeing her struggle, the war going on between her mind and her body. It’s a beautiful sight.

I bring my hand to her jawline, my thumb tracing the contours of her face. “Say it, baby.” I kiss her forehead.

“Please...please kiss me,” she whispers breathlessly.

I bite my lip to smother a satisfied smile. “Since you asked so nicely, baby,” I murmur, my voice dripping with a hint of authority before my lips crash into hers.

The kiss is intense and passionate, our mouths molding together as she sinks in my embrace. Her lips are so soft under mine, and I can’t resist the urge to deepen the kiss. I bite her lower lip gently, my tongue tracing it before pushing in, tasting her. She moans softly, surrendering herself to me.

Her scent surrounds me, filling my senses and making me want more. She tastes so sweet, and I can’t get enough. As our mouths move together, my hands begin to wander, exploring the curves and planes of her body. My fingers slide up her sides, tracing a path up her shirt to the bare skin of her abdomen. I feel a shiver go through her and I know she’s just as affected by me as I am by her.

I deepen the kiss and hold her tight as I push her back towards her bed. She breaks the kiss, her breath coming out in pants as her back hits the mattress, her eyes fixed on mine, wild with desire. Her lips are swollen, and her hair is a mess.

“I need you, Firecracker,” I growl.

“Good thing I am all yours to take captain,” she whispers, her fingers running across my chest, feeling the muscles through my shirt. I groan.

I lean over her. My body presses into hers. “Anya—” The door creaks open. We both freeze as I look up to see Siya standing in the doorway, a confused expression on her face.

“Oh, uh, sorry.” She glances at us and her face turns red before she averts her gaze. “I am so sorry.”

“Siya—” Anya pushes me away, but Siya closes the door with a bang. I turn to face Anya, who is now sitting up, looking flustered and disoriented. Well, I guess we cannot continue further. She covers her face with her hands.

We sit in silence for a few moments. The only sound in the room is our ragged breaths. I watch as Anya smooths out her hair and straightens her clothes, trying to compose herself. I run a hand through my hair, feeling a pang of frustration. I readjust my dick in my pants.

I look at her. She looks at me through her hands. We maintain eye contact, and then she bursts out laughing loudly, and I join her, shaking my head.

“You should probably check on your friend.” I nudge her as we fall on the bed side-by-side. “She looked traumatized,” I add, turning to face her.

“I think I am more traumatized.” She sighs. I pull her into me, my arm wrapping around her waist, holding her close. I bury my face into her neck, nuzzling the soft skin there, taking in her scent.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, breaking the comfortable silence between us. I groan, annoyed at the interruption again, and reluctantly reach for it. The number flashing on the screen is unknown, which makes me frown. Anya glances at me, concern etched on her face.

“Who is it?” she asks softly.

“Don’t know,” I mutter as I answer, pressing the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“Is this Daniel Grayson?” A calm yet urgent voice on the other end asks.

“Yes, this is he. Who’s calling?” I respond, my grip on the phone tightening slightly.

“This is Dr. Matthews from St. Peter’s Hospital. Your father has been admitted here. We recommend you come as soon as possible.” The words hit me like a freight train, slamming into my chest with crushing force. For a moment, the world around me fades, leaving only the static noise of my own heartbeat thundering in my ears.

“W-what?” I manage to croak, my throat tightening as the weight of the news settles in. Dad? Hospitalized ? The words don’t feel real like a cruel trick my mind is playing on me.

“Your father—he was brought in a little while ago,” the voice continues, but the rest of the sentence blurs, drowned out by the deafening buzz in my head.

I can’t lose him. Not now. Not already.

“Daniel?” Anya’s voice breaks through, her hand resting on my arm. Her touch is grounding, reminding me I’m not alone in this moment.

“I...” My voice cracks, the lump in my throat making it almost impossible to speak. “I have to go.”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, but I blink them away, trying to keep it together. The phone slips from my trembling hand but Anya catches it before it hits the floor.

“What happened?” she asks, her voice steady but her eyes filled with worry.

“My dad,” I choke out, the words tasting bitter and wrong on my tongue. “He’s in the hospital.”

Her grip on my arm tightens as her expression shifts to something softer, full of understanding. But no amount of comfort can lessen the fear clawing at my chest.

“I am sorry, I have to go.” I get up hurriedly.

“Do you want me to accompany you?” she asks. I stare at her. That does sound tempting, because if this is the worst case scenario, I am probably going to break. But she does not deserve that. I cannot dump anything on her. Not now.

“No,” I say firmly. “I will call you as soon as I leave. I promise.” I kiss the crown of her head. She looks worried, and I hate that I am the cause of it, but before she can say anything, I turn around to leave.

Dad, please be fine.

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ANYA

It's been four hours. Now, I don't like to sound desperate, but the way he left, the heartbreaking look on his face, has me worried, and there's this gnawing feeling in my chest that even if he said no, I should have followed him anyway. I regret sitting here. I look at the books I have open in front of me, but it's all for show. I cannot understand a single word. I can't even call him, and he is not replying to my texts. I run a hand through my hair.

I glare at the open textbook in front of me, the words blurring together into an incomprehensible mess. My pen hovers over a highlighted line. God, I am scared. I hope his father is fine. Almost unconsciously, my hand moves to the small golden pendant hanging around my neck—a gift from my grandmother before she died. It's a tiny figure of Ganesh Ji, who happens to be the remover of obstacles. I close my eyes, my fingers tracing the familiar contours of the pendant.

Please let everything be okay, I pray. My phone sits silent and mocking beside the books, his unanswered texts a painful reminder of how helpless I feel. I push the textbook away, leaning back in my chair and exhaling sharply, trying to shake off the suffocating sense of unease. There's a knock on my door just then.

"Come in," I call out. The door creaks open, and there he is—Daniel. His face is shadowed with exhaustion, his shoulders heavy with whatever weight he's been carrying. For a moment, I'm too stunned to say anything, relief crashing over me like a tidal wave.

"You're here," I whisper, my voice betraying the mix of emotions swirling inside me:

worry, frustration, and a tinge of anger at him for making me feel like this. How selfish.

Daniel steps in, closing the door behind him, his gaze meeting mine. “Siya let me in,” he says softly. I spring up from my chair.

Observing him carefully, I stand in front of him, unable to decide whether I should leap on him or not, because I want to hug him, tell him that it’s all going to be alright, when I don’t even know what’s wrong.

“He’s fine.” He smiles weakly. “Just dehydration and low blood pressure.” He cups my cheek, and I lean into his hand. “I am sorry for worrying you,” he says.

What the hell is wrong with this man? He is still caring for me, even in moments like this. I am angry now, because why can’t he stop and think about his own fucking self for once?

I take his hand and lead him to my bed. We sit there as I hold his hand. I am happy he came back here because there’s no way in hell I would have been at peace until I saw him.

I put my head on his shoulder. “You do know you will have to talk to me, right?” I frown.

He chuckles softly. “Yes,” he says. He exhales. “I thought I was going to lose him.” I look up at him. “He has lung cancer.” I suck in a breath. My eyes widen. He smiles almost painfully. “When I was driving there, Anya—” His voice breaks, and his tongue peaks out to wet his lips—“I realized if I lose him, too, I am going to be...” He looks at me, his eyes shining with unshed tears. “I will be an orphan.” He laughs humorlessly. I tighten my grip on his hand, my heart breaking for him. I cannot imagine how he must be feeling.

“When Mom died,” he continues, his voice trembling, “I thought it was all over but—” He bites his lips. “---Dad was with me.” He shakes his head, his jaw clenching. “What will I do now, Anya?” He tilts his head. My chest aches as I look into his eyes—eyes filled with fear and desperation, searching mine for something I don’t know if I can give. But I can’t let him see my uncertainty—not when he’s already so lost.

“You’ll take it one step at a time,” I say softly, brushing a strand of his hair out of his face. “And I’ll be with you at every step. I promise,” I say firmly, my voice unwavering. He might have been strong for everyone else his whole life, but I am going to show him that I can be strong for him.

He snuffles and looks away, blinking rapidly, as if to push back the tears threatening to spill. “You shouldn’t have to deal with this,” he mutters, his voice thick with emotion. “This isn’t fair to you, Anya.”

I shake my head, placing a hand on his cheek and gently guiding his face back toward mine. “Don’t,” I whisper, my voice tender but firm. “Don’t shut me out. I care about you, Daniel, and I’m not going to let you face this alone. So stop trying to protect me from your pain. I want to share it.”

His lips tremble, and for a moment, I think he’s going to argue, but instead, he nods. A single tear escapes, trailing down his cheek, and I catch it with my thumb, my heart breaking for him all over again.

As I look at him now, his walls crumbling and his emotions laid bare, I realize this is the first time I’ve truly seen him— really seen him. Daniel has always been the man who smiles through everything and carries the weight of the world on his shoulders with an ease that seems almost superhuman.

But here he is, no longer invincible, no longer perfect. Just human. I’ve always

admired his strength and his unwavering positivity, but seeing this side of him—the raw, vulnerable side—makes me feel closer to him in a way I never expected. It's not just the man who has everything together that I care for. It's this version of him, too—the one who feels lost, afraid, and human.

My fingers linger against his cheek, tracing the path where the tear had fallen. I want to remember this moment, not because it's painful, but because it's real. His pain, his fear, his need for someone to lean on—these are parts of him he's hidden away. He's letting me see them. He's letting me in. His gaze locks onto mine, and for a fleeting moment, I think I see something shift in his eyes. A crack in the armor he's worn for so long. He doesn't say anything, but his hand tightens around mine, as if holding on to me is the only thing grounding him right now.

And I don't mind. I'll be his anchor. I'll be whatever he needs me to be. Because for the first time, I'm not just falling for the version of him I thought I knew. I'm falling for all of him.

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ANYA

I am fuming right now. “Why would you do that?!” I shout.

“I did the right thing, baby,” Daniel says, leaning against the pillar, his hands in his pocket, his eyes soft, and a gentle smile adorns his face. How can this man be so calm? I have no idea, but he is stupid. So what he didn’t help much with this assignment. Did I ever complain? No. Never. I was okay with doing it on my own in the first place. He did not have to rattle it out to the professor about how little he contributed and how I deserved all the marks.

I huff and clench my jaw. “No,” I exclaim. “Now, you are going to fail this assignment.” He really could have just passed if he had kept his mouth shut.

“I know.” He wraps his arms around me, but I do not lean into him the way I like to.

“It’s not like I did the assignment on my own. You were there with me.” I push him away, my heart racing with frustration.

“True.” He holds me again and pecks my nose. “But I did not help you.” He sighs, his gaze dropping to the floor. “I could not sleep yesterday. I felt like a complete asshole.” His eyes meet mine. “It was all your hard work, Firecracker.” He kisses the top of my hair, while his fingers play with the strands. “And I am really proud of you, so I can never take credit from you.”

My breath hitches. Somehow, it feels so special hearing him say that he’s proud of me. “But—” I protest weakly. My frustration melts like butter in a pan, his words

soothing me like a lullaby.

His lips meet mine. My eyes flutter close. He deepens the kiss, turning us around and gently pushing me back until I'm pressed against the wall. The cool surface makes me shudder. His lips brush against mine, our bodies pressed together, the warmth of his skin filling me with sensations that make me want to melt right against him. His hands grip my waist in a possessive way, his touch demanding yet gentle as he pulls me closer. His lips move against mine in a slow and steady rhythm and I can't help but respond just as gently as my fingers trace along the edges of his jaw, exploring the rough stubble that he has recently grown. I can feel Daniel groan in the back of his throat, his mouth parting my lips with an urgent hunger.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs against my lips, his breath warm and sweet. "I got lost in the moment for a bit." His eyes meet mine, soft and sincere, before he clears his throat and offers me a small smile. "What I meant to say is...you deserve this grade on your own, baby."

He brushes a gentle kiss against my cheek, his touch grounding me as I instinctively lean into him. "You never have to carry my burden," he whispers, his lips trailing down to my neckline. I tilt my head, granting him better access, as his voice drops to a tender murmur. "My shoulders are strong enough to carry both of our burdens. Always. Okay?"

"But, that's unfair." I pout. "I can carry my own burdens. And if I have to share mine, you have to share yours, too." I grumble. He needs to know I want to be there for him, too.

He chuckles. "Okay, okay, fair point," he replies. He cups my cheeks. "I do not care much about this subject anyway." He rests his forehead against mine and closes his eyes. His freckles are so cute. I run my finger over them and he smiles gently, his dimple popping out. "I do not care if I pass or fail but—" He opens his eyes. "---I

promise I will pass other assignments, okay?" I simply nod, feeling mesmerized.

He suddenly backs away. "Hmm?" he murmurs as a crease forms between his eyebrows. He looks at something behind me before going around the pillar. "Where is it?" he asks as he looks around in the corridor.

I frown. "What are you looking for?" I ask, looking around myself.

"Your smile." He grins. I exhale, narrowing my eyes at him. He chuckles and I smile, too.

"You really are insane." I swat his chest, unable to keep myself from giggling.

"Insane for you." He winks.

"Oh my god," I exclaim. My cheeks heat up. He laughs out loud, his laughter making my heart warm. I roll my eyes.

"They're so cute." I turn around to see Sophia and Siya gawking at us, identical smiles playing on their lips.

"Hi, babes." I wave as they come closer to us.

Soph chuckles. "We've been watching you lovebirds for two minutes straight and you only noticed us now?" she teases, her smile growing.

"What can I say?" Daniel shrugs. "The rest of the world doesn't exist when I am with her." He smirks.

I twist my face in disgust, but my heart skips a beat at his words. "You guys are so disgustingly in love; it's giving me diabetes," Siya says, her eyes twinkling in awe as

she looks at me.

In love? My eyes widen. I blink at Siya's words, the weight of them settling in my chest. In love? My heart races at the thought. I glance at Daniel, who's leaning casually against the pillar, a playful smile dancing on his lips. He doesn't seem fazed by the label at all. In fact, he looks proud.

Am I in love with him? The question spirals in my mind, sending a rush of warmth through me. I've always felt something special between us, something that ignites my spirit. But love? That feels like a big step, a leap I'm not entirely sure I'm ready for.

He chuckles. "I am not going to apologize for that," he says as he eyes me.

"How was your assignment, Soph?" I change the subject immediately.

"Oh, it was alright. We managed to complete it just in time. I'm glad it's over now," she says with a soft chuckle. "Thankfully, Olivia was an amazing partner." She smiles.

"Mine was the best though." Daniel grins widely. I shake my head and narrow my eyes at him.

"I am glad to hear that, Soph." I throw my arms around Siya and Sophia. "Do you want to eat something?" I look back at Daniel. "I am very hungry," I whine.

He sniggers. "Fine, I'll treat you guys," he says, ruffling my hair.

"Oh, I'm going to make sure you regret that," Soph smirks. "I'm about to order half the menu." She laughs wickedly, and I swat her arm.

"Don't sweat it, Firecracker," he says with a grin, glancing at me. "I've been saving

up for moments like this. Buying dinner for your friends is worth it.”

“He’s at it again,” Soph sighs dramatically.

I chuckle. I love being around these people. My people.

???

ANYA

I give the room a quick glance over to make sure everything is in its place, even tidying up a few things that are out of their usual spot. It's not that I'm a clean freak, but I like to keep my stuff organized, especially in my own space. With everything in order, I shut the cupboard door and turn back to take a quick glance before I answer the video chat.

"Hi." I wave at my parents as their cheery faces fill the screen. My parents smile back at me, their faces lit up by the glow of their laptop screen.

"Hi, beta ," my mom exclaims, her voice cheerful as always.

"Where's your brother?" Papa frowns and leans in closer to the screen.

My mother pushes him back and scowls. "Your eyesight is fine. He hasn't joined in yet." I giggle.

"Where is he though?" Papa asks, ignoring my mother. How bold.

"He has a group assignment. He is out with them right now. He will join as soon as it's over." I smile softly. It must have been so difficult for them to send both of us here. They are very protective of us, and I don't think I have ever stepped out of my house for this long alone, even in India. I did my undergrad in Delhi. I pick up my coffee mug, taking a sip.

"So, Anya, how is that project partner we were talking about?" my mother suddenly

asks, making me choke, I cough, furiously rubbing my chest. She has no filter at all.

“Maa!” I yell. My eyes widen as I look between them.

“What? I am just curious.” Maa smirks as she scrutinizes me.

“What partner?” Papa asks, leaning forward again. His eyes narrow, and he looks back and forth, studying me and Maa .

I chuckle forcedly. “I don’t know what she is talking—” I begin, but my mother interrupts me.

“She has been paired with this guy for a project and we were talking once about him, and the way—” Maa laughs.“---her face turned red. She was in such a hurry to see him. I am telling you, something is going on,” Maa explains.

I gasped. Is she mad? I can’t believe my ears. “Maa!” I protest, feeling my cheeks heat up.

“A guy?” Papa’s eyebrows furrow. Oh no, I think I want to die right now, please.

“So what?” Maa continues. “She is in college. It is absolutely fine for her to have a boyfriend.” She scoffs. “You should remember. We were in college, too when you asked me out,” she says, dismissing Papa.

“That’s not the point,” he mutters. “We were different.”

“Oh, please.” My mom snorts. “I do not think I have to remind you of our college days.” She smiles slyly. My dad’s face turns red, and he looks at me for help, but I just grin. I won’t interfere in this. I lean back in my chair and take a sip of my coffee, enjoying the show.

“Anyways, you do seem happier.” Maa beams as she turns to face me through the screen. “There has to be a reason.” She cocks her eyebrows.

I feel like a deer caught in headlights. I’m trying to look natural, but my heart is racing a mile a minute. “Happier?” I say, trying my best to sound casual. “I...uh...yeah...I guess I am. But that doesn’t matter—” I blurt out.

“Hello,” my brother says as his face appears on the screen, too.

“Oh, there you are,” my mom grins, a little too enthusiastically. I exhale a sigh of relief as my brother distracts my parents’. I quickly take another sip of my coffee and try to regulate my heartbeat.

“How’s the assignment going?” Papa asks, turning to my brother.

“Fine,” he says. “I am heading home right now.”

“Is it okay for you to talk while walking?” my mom asks, brows furrowed with concern.

“It’s just a short walk,” he says, waving off their concern.

“Papa,” I chime in. “You look tired. Are you okay?”

Papa rubs his brow and lets out a heavy sigh. He chuckles. “You noticed, huh?” His eyes soften. “It’s nothing, beta ,” he says.

“What happened, Papa?” Arnav asks.

“Just a long day at work—business issues,” Papa says, his voice weary.

“You can share with us, Papa,” I exclaim. “We are not kids. Maybe we can help.” I smile softly. I have never known someone as hardworking as Papa. He always tells us the story of how he has seen so many failures. Now that he has everything—a family, and a stable income—he still cannot relax. He simply cannot take anything for granted.

He is my role model. I have always sought my father’s appreciation; even his small praises matter a lot to me. Sometimes, I want to take away all his stress. I wish he would believe in me. I wish he would let me help him in his business.

“Nah, beta .” Papa smiles warmly. “I am fine, really.”

I furrow my brow, not convinced. I can see the tiredness in his eyes. “Papa.” Arnav sighs. “Don’t tire yourself out. Your health is more important. What is it? Please tell us.”

Papa’s eyes grow distant as he starts to speak. “Well, there’s this issue with one of our suppliers for the resort. They’ve been inconsistent with their deliveries and it’s causing delays in our operations. It’s a real mess trying to get it sorted out.”

Arnav frowns. “Have you considered negotiating with them for better terms or even looking into other suppliers?”

Papa nods. “Already tried. Bringing in a new supplier right now is a risky move.”

“Papa, what if you try ordering from different suppliers on a trial basis? It could help you manage the risk better. You could start with a smaller order to test their reliability and quality,” I suggest, looking at him intently.

“Hmm, that’s a good idea, Anya. But I’m worried about the initial investment and how it will affect our cash flow,” he says, rubbing his forehead.

“Maybe you could explore alternative payment terms with the new suppliers,” Arnav suggests. “Instead of requiring upfront payments, you might be able to work out payment plans that are more manageable for your cash flow.”

Papa nods, contemplating his idea. “That’s a good point, Arnav. It could help alleviate the immediate pressure on our finances,” he says.

“It can put you in an uncertain position in the long run if you don’t crunch the numbers,” I point out.

Arnav hums. “She’s right. I think Anya’s idea is better in that case.”

Papa shakes his head. “No, I will go ahead with your idea and see how that works.”

A pang of disappointment hits me, I do not think it’s a wise thing to do. Obviously, he is more experienced than me, but I hate it. I almost scoff. Every time I put out a suggestion, it’s turned down by Papa. So, it’s nothing new.

I try to mask my feelings with a smile. “Well, it’s good that we have options now,” I say, though my voice feels thin and unconvincing.

Papa looks visibly relieved. “Thanks for your help, both of you. I’ll look into the payment plan idea.”

I can’t shake the feeling of dismay and feeling ignored. Deep down, I know I can’t control how Papa feels about my ideas, but the sting of rejection still hurts.

“Okay, enough business talk now,” Maa says. “You guys should have your dinner now, okay?” She narrows her eyes, and both Arnav and I nod. “Okay, we will hang up then.” She ends the call.

I take another sip of my coffee, a frown etched on my face. Arnav glances at me with a knowing look, sensing my disappointment. “As a matter of fact, Anya...” He brings his phone closer to his face. “Your idea was better,” he says.

I look at him carefully. “I know. Get home safely,” I say and end the call.

I scroll through my phone to distract myself. Two missed calls and a text from Daniel. I don’t want to talk to anyone right now, so I decide to just message him.

Daniel:

Hi, call me back when you’re done! ????

I feel a pang of guilt because he is always so caring and I don’t want to fake being okay because I’m really not. Plus, he doesn’t like it when I lie. I wouldn’t either, so I take a deep breath and message back.

Will call you later. ????

Almost immediately after I hit send, my phone pings again. Guess he was waiting for my reply.

Daniel:

You alright?

Even if I wanted to, I can’t hide anything from him. He can read me well and he will pester me until I tell him what is going on. And honestly, I just feel I am making a big deal out of this. I will feel better soon, I am sure.

Just family stuff.

Daniel:

You want to talk? Should I come over?

No, there's no need for that!

I reply quickly, not wanting him to come all the way here for me to complain about something so trivial. I can feel myself being irritable again. I just need some time alone to calm down.

I throw my phone on the bed and take out the clothes I had kept aside to wash from the cupboard. I take another sip of my coffee.

Why is it that every time I offer a suggestion, it's met with hesitation or outright dismissal? I can't help but feel that no matter how valid my ideas are, they're always overshadowed by Arnav's, even if his suggestions aren't necessarily better. I put all the clothes in a basket and walk toward the washing machine, picking up my phone on the way.

Arnav has always been the golden child, the one who's naturally good at everything. I know he's smart and talented, but sometimes it feels like my efforts are dismissed just because he's a little better at something or because he's more experienced. It's not that my parents ever compare us directly, but I can see it in their behavior. They trust his judgment more and assume his ideas are more sound. And that hurts.

My phone pings again, jolting me from my thoughts. It's Daniel.

Daniel:

I was just being polite.

I am standing outside your door.

Open up, baby!

“What?” I exclaim out loud, my jaw dropping in disbelief. I quickly run to the door and look through the peephole to see Daniel standing outside. He’s looking at his phone.

I swing open the door. “What the hell are you doing here? I told you not to come over.”

His head snaps up from the phone and he beams at me. “Now, is that any way to greet your boyfriend, Firecracker?” he says, sliding his hand around my waist. He pulls me closer to him. I want to protest—I’m not in the mood for this—but his warmth and familiar scent engulf me, and immediately, I feel a sense of comfort. He’s wearing that stupid charming smile, and I feel a tug at the corner of my lips, too.

“Ugh, fine.” I grumble, though my resistance is waning as I lean into him. I close the door behind him and let out a heavy sigh. “You just had to come all the way here, didn’t you?”

“Wouldn’t be much of a boyfriend if I didn’t, would I?” he says softly, brushing a stray hair from my face. “You sounded down, so I had to check in on you.”

I push him away and walk to the washing machine. I can hear him follow me. I start sorting through the clothes. He leans against the doorframe, watching me with a concerned expression. I feel the weight of his gaze and the warmth of his presence, and it’s oddly comforting, even if I’m trying to push him away.

“It was nothing. I am fine. I don’t want to talk about it,” I say, trying to sound casual as I load the clothes into the machine.

“Okay, we don’t have to talk,” he says and hugs me from behind. I huff. Why does he have to be like this?

“You’re clingy, you know that?” I mutter, but I don’t protest when his arms wrap around me. I lean into him. He smells nice.

“I know I am,” he whispers, his lips near my ear. “I can’t help it.”

He has this effect on me. He’s like a drug, and I know I’m too weak to resist him. He kisses my neck softly. It almost has me melting, but I resist the urge. I fumble with the button of the washing machine. I dump the clothes in, but all I can focus on is the warm pressure of his body against my back, his chin resting on my shoulder. I can feel his heartbeat through his chest, and it’s strangely calming.

“I am just overthinking,” I comment, breaking the silence. The only sounds audible are that of the washing machine and his soft breaths falling on my neck. “I just don’t feel...” I pause. Finding the right words to describe how I feel is difficult. “I don’t know how to say it.” I sigh.

“Well, how about you throw out some words, and I will put it together and make sense of it?” he whispers in my ear. I chuckle and turn around to face him.

“I had a video call with my parents today. We do that once every week,” I say. He already knows that; I told him before, I think. “Papa looked a little tired so I asked him what’s wrong.” I pause and look down. “He had some business issue and—” I chuckle humorlessly—“I guess I am too eager to help him out that I offered a solution and so did Arnav.” I sigh. “I do not want to sound like a bitter person at all, but I hate it that I am not taken seriously at all.”

I look up at him, wanting to see his expression. “Like today, Arnav joined late. When I was talking with my parents, Maa talked about my love life.” I snigger. “By the

way, she thinks there is something going on between you and me. I guess mothers do know the best.” He smiles softly and kisses my hair. “When Arnav joined in, he was asked about his studies.” I frown. “I mean he is a reserved person and doesn’t really talk much, so I guess I understand why they stick to the point with him, but since I have come here, I have never been asked how my studies are going,” I whisper. “They did not even ask me for my first semester’s results. It’s as if they just sent me here to have fun or something,” I huff. “It feels like I am invisible to them, My efforts are invisible,” I mutter. Daniel watches me silently. I feel my heart tug. What if he thinks I am being whiny?

“I just hate this side of me.” I let out a dry laugh. “I sound so jealous,” I say, feeling a lump forming in my throat. God, I hate this. I am not used to speaking my mind to everyone. And now, this person just won’t let me suffer in silence. He needs to know what is going on inside me.

I let out a shaky breath. “I am so pathetic.” I blink furiously to not let tears fall from my eyes.

He holds me tighter and presses a soft kiss to my temple. “Then let’s be pathetic together, Firecracker,” He says, “You are not jealous. And even if you are, all your feelings matter to me okay?” He looks into my eyes. His words make my chest tighten in a way that’s both painful and comforting.

I blink back the sting of tears. “You always know what to say, don’t you?”

“I just tell the truth,” he says simply, pressing a kiss to my temple. “You’re amazing, Anya. And I’m proud of you. Always.”

I turn in his arms, facing him fully now. His expression is so earnest that it makes my heart ache. “Thank you,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

He cups my face gently, his thumb brushing against my cheek. “You don’t have to thank me. I’ll remind you every day if I have to.” For now, I let myself bask in his comfort, deciding to let the weight of the day melt away in his arms. Maybe tomorrow, I’ll tackle the world again. But tonight, I’ll let him be my anchor.

???

ANYA

I have never wanted to make an effort for anyone. Even in my past relationships, I've always felt that if someone cared enough, they'd meet me halfway. But with Daniel, things are different. This man makes me feel as if I am the center of his universe. He makes me feel seen. I always try so hard to excel over others, to be a person that I am not. There's this constant pressure I put on myself to be perfect, to prove that I'm worth it. I wear this mask of confidence, thinking that if I appear strong and flawless, no one will notice my flaws.

But Daniel sees right through it. When he looks at me, I can feel his gaze peeling away the layers I've built up. It's both terrifying and exhilarating. I want to be real with him, to drop the facade and show him who I truly am—messy, vulnerable, and sometimes lost. But the fear of not being enough always lingers in the back of my mind.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm even worth it. If I can give him what he deserves. The thought twists my insides into a knot. Daniel is everything I'm not: grounded, patient, effortlessly kind. I can't help but feel that, one day, he'll realize I'm not the ideal woman he thinks I am.

What if he wakes up one morning and decides he deserves better? The idea is suffocating. It makes me want to retreat, to hide behind the mask again.

Yet, there's something in the way he smiles at me like he genuinely cares about my messy edges and all the imperfections I'm so afraid to show. It makes me want to take the leap, to trust him enough to let him in.

I ring the bell of his apartment. He isn't aware that I am visiting. I could have informed him beforehand, but it wouldn't give me the pleasure of seeing his face light up. I smile slightly, imagining his reaction.

I want to make an effort for him, not just because he does so for me too, but because I think I can. There's a part of me that feels inspired by the way he shows his true kind self so openly and honestly. It's like he's holding a mirror to his heart, reflecting the warmth he has kept hidden. I want to be that brave.

The door swings open and Daniel hurriedly steps out. His eyes widen. I extend the bouquet of yellow tulips I picked up on the way here, to him. I read somewhere it symbolizes warmth and cheerfulness, and when I saw it, I knew I had to get it because it reminded me of him. It reminded me of his smile.

"I brought you some flowers," I say, tilting my head and smiling at him.

He pulls me into his arms and wraps me up in a warm embrace, his breath warm against my neck. "Thank you, Firecracker," he says. He takes my hand, guiding me into his room. He closes the door behind us. "I will be back in a second," he says. His hands linger on me a moment longer before he reluctantly pulls away. He walks away, disappearing into the balcony attached to his room .

When he comes back, he has a bouquet of colorful flowers in his hands. His eyes soften and he chuckles. "Will you believe it if I say I was just heading to your house to give you flowers, too?" he asks, his voice filled with disbelief.

"Really?" I ask breathlessly. "Did you buy it from the campus florist?"

He nods and frowns at me. "How did you know?" he asks.

"Because," I tiptoe toward him. "The florist said that a guy came in this morning to

buy flowers for his girlfriend and could not decide on one, so he just took some of each.” I chuckle in his ear. He wraps his arms around my waist as he grins and pecks my nose. I smile softly and press my lips against his.

Daniel throws the flowers on his bed, and breaks the kiss. His nose brushes against my neck, sending tingles down my spine as he whispers in my ear, “I can't hold back anymore, Firecracker.” He kisses my neck, his teeth lightly nibbling and sucking on my sensitive flesh. I gasp softly, arching my back.

He pulls back and looks into my eyes, his eyes intense, desire swirling in them. “I swear to God,” he growls as he pulls me closer, if that’s even possible. “If someone interrupts now, I am going to war.” He huffs.

His grip on me tightens, and his hands begin to roam even more eagerly over my body. He picks me up and throws me on the bed. “Daniel!” I exclaim. I have never seen him so out of focus, so desperate, and it makes me happy that it is because of me. He climbs the bed, spreading my legs as he comes near me. He brushes his lips against my cheek before trailing down to my neck.

“You drive me wild, Anya,” he murmurs, his breath hot against my skin. I respond with a soft sigh, wrapping my arms around his neck.

I feel him pulling on my shirt, his fingers grazing against my skin. The sensation is electric, making me feel vulnerable yet undeniably wanted. He cups my left breast and bites my right one through the fabric. I shudder beneath his touch. He hooks his finger at the hem of my top, raises his head, and looks into my eyes. “May I?” he asks, his voice husky.

I nod slowly as my head buzzes with anticipation. His hands slide up my shirt and the touch of his cool fingers sends shivers across my skin. He deftly removes my top and unhooks my bra, tossing them haphazardly on the floor. His eyes rove over my bare

skin, his gaze hungry. “You’re beautiful,” he whispers, his breath tickling my ear.

My breath hitches when he leans in, his lips grazing my collarbone, sending shivers down my spine. I close my eyes as his mouth trails soft kisses along my shoulder. I lift my hand and gently run my fingers through his hair, the strands soft under my touch. He leans into my palm, his eyes never leaving mine as he presses a kiss into it. “I want you. All of you,” Daniel whispers. His thumb strokes my cheek as he looks at me with the utmost sincerity. “I am asking you to push me away, Anya,” he mutters. “If you don’t want this, please,” he begs, but there’s no way in hell I wouldn’t want this, wouldn’t want him.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “But what if I do want this?” I respond, my voice barely a whisper. “If I need this too?” I add, my eyes meeting his. His gaze remains steady on me, unwavering as he studies my face. I reach up and gently cup his face, my thumb stroking his cheek. His eyes close, like he’s savoring the feeling of my touch. “I want you, Daniel,” I confess.

“I am addicted to you, Anya,” Daniel whispers, the words sending shivers down my spine. I tilt my head slightly, a soft gasp escaping my lips as his breath ghosts over the sensitive skin of my neck. “Your scent, the way your skin feels against mine.” He trails his fingertips along my jawline, his touch burning with a delicate fervor that leaves me breathless. “Your laughter,” he murmurs, his lips hovering near mine. He presses them onto mine, capturing my lower lip between his teeth, nibbling and sucking it. A tremor courses through me a soft moan escaping my lips. He’s kissing me like a starved man. I run my hands down his chest and abdomen, feeling the ridges of his abs. I can feel the heat radiating off him, the need pouring off him in waves. “Everything. I am addicted to everything about you, Firecracker.” His forehead touches mine as he whispers against my lips.

I tug at his shirt’s hem. “Take it off, captain,” I plead.

A playful challenge dances in Daniel's eyes as he responds. "Say please," he whispers, his lips just a tantalizing breath away.

I lean in, my lips grazing his ear as I whisper seductively, "Please, captain." His hands find the hem of his shirt, slowly lifting it upwards. I sit up, my eyes locked on his movements as he slowly reveals his bare torso, inch-by-inch.

His skin glistens and every contour of his toned abs and muscular arms is defined in the dim light. A deep V-line disappears beneath the waistband of his jeans, and I can't help but stare at him. He chuckles.

"Like what you see, Firecracker?"

I nod. "Yes. Very much," I murmur as I sit up and press my breasts against his hard abs, my nipples hardening in response. He inhales sharply before letting out a low groan. His hands grip my waist as he pushes me down on the bed. His breath is hot and ragged as he presses his forehead against mine, his lips brushing against my ear.

His hands travel up my sides, his thumbs brushing lightly against the sides of my breasts, sending sparks of electricity through my body. His hands move lower, trailing down my back, leaving a fiery path in their wake. "I do not like this barrier, Anya," he says, unbuttoning my jeans. He kisses my navel softly as he swiftly takes it off.

His fingers hook around the waistband of my panties, tugging them down slowly, teasingly, as his gaze locks with mine. There's an intensity in his eyes, like he's savoring every moment, every inch of me. His hands slide up my thighs, the roughness of his palms against my smooth skin causing my breath to catch in my throat. I can feel the raw need in his touch, the same need that's coursing through my veins. He kisses the inside of my thigh and my body tenses, anticipation building inside me like a coiled spring ready to snap.

He hovers over me, his lips brushing against mine in the lightest of touches, making my heart race even faster. “Are you sure?” he murmurs, his voice barely above a whisper. His forehead rests against mine and I can feel the restraint in his body, the tension in his muscles as he waits for my answer.

I nod, too breathless to speak, my body already aching for him. His lips crash against mine in a fiery kiss, and I lose myself in the sensation of him—the way his hands grip my hips, the way his body presses against mine, hot and hard. I run my hands through his hair, tugging lightly as he groans into my mouth, his kiss becoming more urgent, more desperate.

Daniel pulls back just enough to look into my eyes, his chest rising and falling rapidly. “You don’t know what you do to me,” he says, his voice rough with desire. His fingers slide inside me, slow and deep, and I can’t suppress the moan that escapes my lips. My breath hitches, my eyes fluttering shut as his fingers begin to move in slow, deliberate circles, teasing and testing. His touch is deliberate, every movement measured as if he’s learning exactly how I respond to him.

“Daniel...” I breathe his name, my voice shaky and I can feel him smirk against my neck, his lips grazing my skin.

“Does that feel good, Firecracker?” he whispers, sending shivers through me .

I can only nod, my body responding to every movement of his fingers, the pressure building inside me, tightening with each stroke. He curls his fingers slightly, hitting a spot that makes my hips buck involuntarily. My moan is louder this time, my hands instinctively clutching his shoulders for support.

His pace quickens, the intensity growing, and I feel like I’m unraveling beneath him. My entire body feels like it’s on fire, every nerve ending alive, sensitive to his touch. His free hand grips my thigh, holding me steady as my body trembles.

“Look at me,” he murmurs, and I force my eyes open, meeting his gaze. His eyes are dark, filled with heat and something else, something deeper. The connection between us in this moment is electric, raw, and real.

The pressure inside me builds to an unbearable peak, my breath coming out in short gasps. I feel the tension coil tighter, until finally, it snaps, sending me spiraling over the edge. I cry out, my body shaking as waves of pleasure crash through me, my hands gripping him desperately as I ride out the sensations.

Daniel doesn’t stop, his fingers still moving inside me, coaxing every last bit of pleasure from my body until I’m left breathless, my skin flushed, my heart pounding wildly in my chest.

He pulls his fingers out slowly, gently. Never breaking eye contact, he licks his fingers. The sight sends a shiver through me and my breath hitches.

“You taste incredible,” he murmurs, his voice low and rough. His hand cups my cheek, his thumb brushing my lips, and I can barely breathe. The intensity in his eyes makes me feel like I’m the only thing that exists at this moment, like nothing else matters but us.

I reach up, grabbing the back of his neck and pulling him down into a desperate kiss. My lips crash against his, wild and frantic— I can’t get enough. My hands roam over his chest, feeling the hard planes of his muscles and the heat of his skin. I need more—I need all of him. My fingers fumble at the waistband of his jeans, tugging impatiently.

“Off,” I whisper against his lips, my voice shaky with need. “I need you, Daniel.” He grins, but there’s a flicker of something wild in his eyes as he pulls back just enough to look at me.

“Patience, Firecracker,” he says even as his voice betrays the same urgency I feel. His hands are trembling slightly as he unbuttons his jeans and kicks them off, leaving him in nothing but his boxers.

My eyes drift down, and I can’t help but stare at the obvious bulge pressing against the fabric. Heat floods through me and I bite my lip, already aching for him. I reach out, grazing my fingers along the waistband of his boxers. But he grabs my wrists gently, pinning them above my head, his lips brushing against my ear. His mouth trails down my neck, leaving a burning path as he kisses his way to my breasts, teasing me with soft, featherlight touches. My body arches beneath him, desperate for more.

“Daniel,” I gasp, “I need you...now.”

He groans softly and I can feel his restraint snapping. He pulls off his boxers in one swift motion. I suck in a breath as I take in the sight of him—completely bare, completely mine. He walks over to his bedroom drawer and takes out a condom, tearing the packet using his teeth. I think I am in heaven. He returns to me, puts the flower bouquet away on the side table, and climbs onto the bed.

He hovers over me, his lips ghosting over mine in a kiss that’s soft, deliberate. My heart pounds in my chest as I feel the tip of him brush against my entrance, sending a shock of pleasure through me. I gasp, my hands clutching at his biceps. With a groan, he pushes into me slowly, filling me inch by inch. I gasp at the sensation, my fingers digging into his back as my body adjusts to the fullness of him. He stills for a moment, giving me time to catch my breath, his eyes never leaving mine.

“God, Anya.” He breathes, his voice rough and full of emotion. “You feel so good.” I can’t respond. Only a soft moan escapes my lips as he starts to move, each thrust slow and steady, drawing the tension tighter between us. Every inch of me is alive with sensation, every movement pushing me closer to the edge. His lips are on mine

again, kissing me with a desperation that matches my own. My hips move with his, our bodies finding a rhythm that feels both urgent and right, like we've been waiting for this moment forever.

He picks up the pace, his breath heavy against my skin. I can feel the tension in my body building higher and higher. Every thrust, every kiss, is bringing me closer to that breaking point. "Don't stop, Daniel, please," I beg.

The urgency in my voice ignites something primal in him because he responds by deepening his thrusts, his pace quickening, until he's driving into me relentlessly. My body feels alive, every cell tingling with pleasure. I can hardly think; it's as if all the worries and fears I've held onto are slipping away, drowned out by the rhythm of us.

"Anya." He breathes against my ear, the sound sending a jolt of desire through me. "You're irresistible." Each word wraps around me like a warm embrace, fueling the fire within. I can feel the heat rising, pooling in my core as he continues to move, pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

I arch my back, meeting him with each thrust, my breath coming in short gasps. "Yes, just like that." I manage to gasp, my fingers digging into his arms, desperate for him, for more. I can feel the tension building, coiling tightly within me.

He leans down, his forehead resting against mine. His eyes lock onto mine with such fierce intensity that it sends a thrill coursing through me. "Let go, baby," he whispers, his voice low and steady.

"Daniel," I cry, my body arching, pleading. "I can't hold on much longer."

"Then don't," he urges, his voice thick with need. "Let go for me, Firecracker."

"Daniel!" I cry out as I explode, my body shuddering under the force of the climax.

Every inch of me pulses with ecstasy, every nerve ending alive and humming, but he doesn't stop his movements wild, desperate, chasing his own release.

With one last thrust, he buries himself deep inside me, his body tensing as he reaches his peak. "Any!" he moans, his voice filled with raw pleasure.

He rolls over to my right side, still holding my hand. I turn to him, my heart racing. I take in his form, his chest rising and falling like a tide, his features relaxed, and the corners of his lips turned upward into a satisfied smile. He looks utterly perfect at this moment and I feel a swell of affection for him.

He turns around, facing me. He grins lazily at me, pecking my nose gently. I giggle and cuddle into his chest. He wraps his arm around me and kisses my hair.

"You are so—" He begins.

"Beautiful. I know. Let's move on." I smirk, looking up at him.

"I don't think I can ever move on from that, baby." He pushes me back on the bed and climbs on top of me as he presses his lips on mine again.

???

DANIEL

I think I am in heaven. I sigh and nuzzle my head in her breasts. “ Tch .” Anya groans. “Stop moving,” she says.

I look up at her smiling. “Why?”

“You feel amazing in my arms,” she says as she tightens her arms around me. I chuckle.

I like being the big spoon while cuddling, but I guess Anya brings out this new side of me that even I did not know about. I can’t help but smile at her words, feeling a warmth spread through me as I nestle closer.

“Now, stop staring,” she whines, her eyes still closed. I snigger.

“I told you already: I can’t get over how beautiful you are,” I state.

She finally opens her eyes and tilts her head downwards to look at me. Sunlight hits her brown eyes, turning them gold. They look like pools of honey. Soft and warm and kind.

“Don’t lie.” She huffs. “My hair is a mess. I have puffy eyes. And my cheeks feel like they are on fire. You find me beautiful even now?” She frowns .

“Especially right now. ” I kiss her collarbone. “You are always beautiful. Even when you are not trying. Even if you drowned in a pool of garbage, I’d still find you

beautiful.”

Her face twists in disgust. “Why would I be in a pool of garbage, Daniel?” She cocks an eyebrow.

I ignore her and continue kissing her collarbone, working my way up to her neck. She lets out a soft moan, her head tilting back in pleasure.

She pushes me away. “I am hungry.” She pouts.

“I have something you can snack on, Firecracker,” I tease, winking at her. She rolls her eyes, but a slight blush spreads across her cheeks.

“I meant real food, you idiot,” she retorts, but there’s no real bite in her words.

I laugh. “Fine, fine. I’ll go make us something to eat. How does a homemade breakfast sound?”

“Delicious.” She grins and gives me a double thumbs-up. I chuckle, getting up from the bed. I put on my sweatpants. Anya’s lips dart out and she bites her lower lip. I smirk.

“Can you take these flowers and put them in a vase?” Anya asks, her voice sultry. I nod. “Before that, can you give me one flower from your bouquet? I want to preserve it.”

“How will you preserve it?” I ask, genuinely confused.

“I will put it in a book. It will dehydrate the flower. Then I can always keep it.” She smiles.

“You don’t have to. I will give you flowers every day if you want,” I say.

“I know, but I want to keep these. So, choose one flower from your bunch and give it to me.” She sits up, stretching her arms. I pick out a bright daisy from my bouquet and hand it to Anya. She takes it with glee.

She is holding the daisy like it is the most precious thing in the world and it makes me grin like an idiot. I can’t help but think how easy it is to want to give her everything. I grab the pancake mix from the cupboard and set to work. I give her a quick peck on her nose, pick up the bouquets, and make my way to the kitchen.

The pan sizzles as I pour the batter onto it. I glance over my shoulder and catch Anya walking into the kitchen. I turn around.

“Is that my hoodie?” My eyes rake over her body. She looks so pretty, the sleeves too long for her, completely dwarfing her small frame. My heart skips at the sight of her in my clothes.

“Yeah. You don’t mind, do you?” she asks.

“Do you want another one or two?” I walk over to her and wrap my arms around her.

“No, I am fine with this one.” She hugs me back and sighs.

“Too bad. I would have loved to see you submerged in my clothes.” I rest my chin against her head.

“Shut it.” She swats my back. “Return to your work, captain.” She pushes me away.

I chuckle as I step back to the stove. “Yes, ma’am!” I say, saluting her playfully.

As I pour another round of pancake batter into the pan, I can feel her watching me. “So, what’s your favorite pancake topping?” I ask over my shoulder, trying to keep the conversation going.

“Definitely maple syrup,” she replies without hesitation. “But I wouldn’t mind some whipped cream and cherries.”

I laugh at her delightful enthusiasm for food. “Alright, we’ll make it a pancake extravaganza. Syrup, whipped cream, and cherries coming right up!” She laughs, the sound musical to my ears. I can’t help but beam as I flip the pancakes; her laughter is contagious.

I stack the pancakes high on a plate, the warm, sweet scent filling the kitchen. “Look at this masterpiece!” she exclaims, grinning widely.

“Dig in, Firecracker,” I say, pouring syrup over my stack.

She follows suit, dousing her pancakes in syrup and adding a dollop of whipped cream and a handful of cherries. I can’t help but laugh at how serious she looks as she meticulously arranges everything.

“Now, this is a breakfast,” she says, taking her first bite. Her eyes go wide and a smile spreads across her face. “Oh my god, Daniel! These are incredible!” She does a happy dance, and I laugh. “I can never get over your pancakes.”

I take a bite of my own and nod in agreement. “I might just have a future in culinary arts,” I say sarcastically.

She laughs. I watch her as she eats her pancakes, carefree, unaware of the rest of the world. It is embarrassing that I am jealous of her food now.

Anya picks up a cherry, its deep red skin gleaming in the light. She holds it delicately between her fingers. As she takes a bite and I gulp. I extend my hand. She cocks an eyebrow. "Spit," I command. "The seed."

She smirks as she holds the seed between her teeth and leans down to drop it in my palm. She kisses my finger and looks up at me as she sucks at the syrup on my thumb.

I shiver. "Firecracker." I groan. "Do not tease me."

She raises her hands in surrender and straightens up. "Apologies, captain." She grins. I shake my head, trying to hide my smile. What am I going to do with this woman?

"I have a question for you," she says, chewing her pancake. "I saw this reel on Instagram. The girl asked her boyfriend if he would kiss her for \$1 or kiss Emma Watson for \$10,000. What would your response be?" She tilts her head, narrowing her eyes at me. I chuckle.

"That is a very simple baby." I push my plate aside and lean forward pecking her lips. "I would pay \$10,000 to kiss you," I say, my mouth still hovering over hers.

She gasps and blushes furiously. "What is wrong with you?!" she exclaims. I chuckle, taking a seat. I love seeing her so red.

She leans back in her chair, avoiding my eyes, and cuts the pancake. She brings it to her mouth slowly, sighing as she takes the bite and closes her eyes.

"Are you full?" I frown.

Her eyes flutter open. She gives me a small smile. "I can manage."

“No.” I take her plate. “I know you do not like wasting food,” I say softly. “I will finish it for you.”

“How do you know that?” she whispers, her eyes wide.

“I don’t know. I just picked it up. You never once wasted anything we ate at the cafe or your place or mine, even when you were struggling.” I shrug. “Although, I would like to know why you do it.” I tilt my head as I study her.

“My mother always says we should be grateful for what we have, so I try to gobble up everything.” She chuckles. “Back in India, we used to get leftovers packed and we gave it out to the homeless.”

“That’s nice.” I smile. “So, if I promise to always make pancakes, will you keep letting me take your leftovers?” I ask, trying to keep the mood light.

She chuckles, shaking her head. “You’re so ridiculous, Daniel. But I wouldn’t mind as long as they’re this good.”

???

DANIEL

The gym echoes with the rhythmic thud of basketballs bouncing against the hardwood. I wipe my brow with the back of my hand, glancing at Anya sitting in the stands. She's typing furiously on her laptop, probably finishing some assignment.

I can't focus on anything at all because the next match is a do-or-die for me. Louis passes the ball to me. I aim for a three-pointer, and the ball leaves my hand, soaring through the air toward the hoop. My arm sways with a swift motion and the ball lands with a satisfying swish, dropping perfectly into the net. The sound echoes throughout the gym, followed by a collective sigh of relief from my teammates.

The rush never gets old; the satisfaction of making the shot is thrilling. Louis pats my back. "Let's take a break," he says silently. I look at the boys. They do look tired; we have been at it for three hours.

"Okay, guys. We will begin in thirty," I announce.

I head towards the stand and take a seat beside Anya. She looks up from her laptop. "I am so glad we are done with that assignment." She sighs and shuts her laptop. "I have to study for the midterms and make notes for finals."

She takes out the hand towel and water bottle from my bag, giving it to me.

I wipe my face and open the bottle. "Wait for a while," Anya says. I cock an eyebrow. "It's said we should not drink water immediately after workouts," she says, "At least in India, it is said." She shrugs. I chuckle. She picks up her coffee mug, but

before she can take a sip, I snatch it from her, careful not to spill it. “What the hell?” She frowns and gasps.

“Drink water first, baby,” I command.

“Are you ordering me?” She crosses her arms and raises an eyebrow.

I smile sheepishly. “You think I could ever do that?” I pat her head. “No, I am not. I am just begging because the only liquid you consume is coffee, and I have no idea how you survive on that.”

She grumbles. “I can drink whatever I want, thank you very much.” She pouts, her lip jutting out, and I have to stop myself from biting it and pulling her onto my lap right here.

“Come on.” I shift closer to her. “Be a good girl and drink your water, Firecracker,” I whisper in her ear, biting her earlobe. She shudders, her cheeks reddening at my words. I can practically see her melting as my breath tickles her ear. I can’t help but feel smug at how effortlessly I make her blush.

She sighs. “Fine.” Conceding,, her lips press into a thin line as she grabs the bottle from my hand.

I chuckle at her expression. She looks like a grumpy puppy, but it’s even funnier, considering her small frame and the oversized hoodie she wears. I continue to smile to myself, watching her gulping down the water.

She glances at me and narrows her eyes. “What are you grinning about?” she huffs.

“Can’t a guy smile for no reason?” I grin. She crosses her arms, but I can see the red in her cheeks, and it fills me with satisfaction.

I'm a Barbie girl, in the Barbie world,

Life in plastic, it's fantastic.

What the fuck. I look around. She laughs out loud. "It's your phone." I stare at her in disbelief, and she shrugs. "You remember the first time you tried to kiss me and couldn't because my phone rang? Your face was a sight. I wanted to see it again."

I roll my eyes. "That was the worst timing imaginable," I grumble. I pick up my phone.

"It's my dad. I have to take this," I say. She nods so I pick up the call.

"Hi, Danny," Dad says, his voice sounding better than the last time.

"Hi, Dad." I smile. "I heard there's progress in your treatment."

"Yeah," he says. I can sense the smile in his voice, which makes me grin. Anya holds my hand and plays with my thumb absent-mindedly.

"Dad." I pause and peck her cheek. "I am coming to visit you next Sunday. My match is on Friday," I say gently.

"I know. All the best," he says half-heartedly.

"Dad, I promised you," I murmur. "I won't torment you after this." I chuckle almost painfully. "If I do not win this match, I will not play basketball professionally." Anya gasps and stands up, her eyes wide.

'Are you mad?' she mouths.

“I will take over your business,” I say firmly.

Dad sighs. “Okay. I am not happy about it either, but I am doing it for you.”

I ignore him. “And, Dad.”

Anya swats my arm. ‘ Don’t ignore me ,’ she mouths again as she places her hands on her hips in frustration.

“I am bringing my girlfriend. I would like you to meet her.” She gasps again. I am so dead.

“Okay,” Dad says. “I am eager to meet her.” He cuts the call with that.

“You didn’t even ask me?” she whisper-yells.

“I don’t have to.” I shrug.

“Yes, you have to. You expect me to meet your father. I have never met someone’s parents in a relationship. What if he doesn’t like me?” She frowns.

I grab her chin, pulling her closer to me as I place a soft kiss on her lips. “Well, I do not care if he likes you or not.” I peck her cheek.

“Still.” She huffs and sits down next to me. “Oh!” she exclaims. “What were you saying on the phone? You are quitting basketball?”

“I am not. If I win the next match, that is.” I run my hand through my hair. “This is killing me, Anya.” I inhale deeply. “All I can do is give my best. It’s his last wish. That’s all he is asking of me.” I rub my eyes.

She holds my hands. “I know.” She looks so concerned; my heart skips a beat. “But—” I put a finger on her lip.

“I know it is wrong. I have thought about it multiple times. I tried to put myself in his shoes, but every time the conclusion was that I could have never asked something like this from my child, but he is too afraid, I think,” I smile. “I am so tempted to break this promise after he is gone, but him not being here is so unacceptable,” My eyes burn with unshed tears. “I would want him to live through this promise, if that’s what he wants.”

I feel this whirlwind of emotions churning inside me. It’s like I’m caught in a tug-of-war between two worlds—one pulsing with the adrenaline of basketball, the thrill of the game, and the other anchored in my dad’s expectations, his hopes for me to take over his business.

Basketball has always been my lifeline. It’s more than just a sport; it’s where I feel most alive, where I can let everything else fade away. The court is my escape, my sanctuary. The roar of the crowd, the bond with my teammates—it’s exhilarating. Every shot I take feels like a piece of my soul being poured into the game.

But then there’s my dad’s voice nagging at me, reminding me of his last wish. I can practically hear him saying, “I want you to have a secure future.” It hits me in the gut every time. He’s only looking out for me, but it’s suffocating. Taking over his business? That feels like a prison sentence. I can’t picture myself in a suit, shuffling papers and making deals. That’s not who I am. I’m a player, not a businessman.

“What is the business?” she asks, curiosity shining in her eyes the way it does when talking about her passion.

“We produce and sell air and water purifiers.”

“Oh,” she says. “that’s nice. I have always loved businesses related to the environment.” She smiles.

“I know. You told me.” I smile weakly.

She cups my face. Her eyes shine, “Captain, talk to me.”

“I just...” I falter. “I don’t want to let him down but...I don’t want to give up basketball either,” I finally admit, my voice shaking a little. “It’s just so hard. I feel like I’m being pulled in two different directions.”

She nods, squeezing my hands tighter. “It’s okay to feel that way. You’re facing a huge decision. It is easier said than done, but I would love to see you on top of this game.”

She kisses my cheek softly. I close my eyes in contentment. “I didn’t learn the rules of this sport for nothing, Daniel,” she whispers in my ear .

“You learned the rules? When? And why?” My eyes widen as I study her.

The tips of her ears turn red. “Yes, this is your life. Of course, I had to get to know it.” Her eyes widen. “I mean, I am not even close to what you know, obviously. I am not learning how to play. I just want to be able to enjoy your games, and I—” I chuckle.

“Thank you, baby.” I rest my forehead against hers. “Thank you.” I peck her nose. “I will make sure to win the next match.” I wink. “Only if you come and cheer for me.”

“Of course I will.” She leans in. “And I will wear your jersey.” She kisses my hair.

I grunt. Imagining her in my jersey is borderline painful to my heart. I wonder how it

would feel to look at her with my name printed on her back, with her cheering my name from the stands.

“That’s highly motivating, Firecracker.” I smirk and tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. “And then I am going to fuck you hard in my jersey until you are screaming my name.” The image of her in jersey, with her lips parted, breathing heavily, and moaning my name, is making me feel a certain way.

“Promise?” She pouts.

I grumble and let my head fall back. “Don’t tease me, baby.” I groan. I grab her hair and pull it lightly as our noses touch, “I promise not to be gentle with you.”

She laughs, pushing me away. “I look forward to that. Your teammates are staring at us,” she says.

“Right.” I look back. They have wide grins plastered on their faces. I know it's not going to be peaceful in the locker room today. “Gotta go. When you leave, let me know, okay?” I stand up and kiss her hair. She nods and gives me a wide smile. I would die just to see that smile.

???

DANIEL

I lean back against the cool kitchen counter, watching Anya as she tries to navigate the chaos unfolding in front of her. She's got her recipe book open, but she seems to be fighting for her life while chopping those vegetables. "Okay, let's see," she mutters, scanning the page. Her brows furrow in concentration, and her tongue peeks out like it always does when she is focused. The chopping of vegetables is less rhythmic now; it's more like she's battling them into submission.

"Anya, you could hurt yourself. That's not the right way to cut cauliflower," I say. My brows furrow.

"I saw it in a reel," she says. "Besides, isn't life just one long attempt to avoid dying anyway?" She shrugs. Wow, what a philosophy. I shake my head. A few stray pieces tumble off the cutting board and she sighs in frustration.

I stifle a laugh. She turns around and glares at me. "Don't laugh at me." She raises the knife at me, a mock threat. I bring my hands up in surrender.

"But seriously, you don't have to cook," I say, trying to keep my tone light. "We could order takeout or something."

Her eyes narrow and I can see the determination in her expression. "No, I have decided I want to cook, so I will." She pushes a strand of her hair away from her face. "And I swear I am not that bad," I stand up and walk out of the kitchen. I take a right to enter my bedroom and open the drawer on the side table. I rummage around for a moment before grabbing a scrunchie.

I return to the kitchen and find her still wrestling with the vegetables, a frustrated pout on her lips. “Here,” I say, holding up the scrunchie. “Let’s get that hair out of your face, now that you have decided no one can stop you,” I say, standing behind her.

“Are you calling me stubborn?” She narrows her eyes at me.

I chuckle and kiss the top of her head. “Even if you are stubborn.” I gather her unruly hair in my palm and pull back gently, brushing the tendrils away from her face, making her lean back. I place a gentle kiss on her exposed neck, a soft sigh tumbling from her lips. “You are mine.”

“God,” she exclaims. “Your friends are right. You have become cheesy.” She shakes her head, but I can see the small smile forming on her face.

“Maybe. But you like it, Firecracker.” I wink at her. Her earlobes turn red as she turns her head slightly to look at me.

“Shut up.” She huffs, shaking her head.

I turn her around. I lean in closer, my hand finding the nape of her neck as I pull her gently against me. Her breath hitches as our lips finally meet. The kiss starts soft and tentative. She melts into me and everything feels right. I can taste the carrot she must have eaten when she was chopping it. Her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me closer, and I deepen the kiss. My hands slide down her hips, gripping tightly. She moans, making my dick hard. Pulling back slightly, she smirks.

“Why are you hard?” The million dollar question.

“Your existence is enough of a reason, I feel.” I shrug and capture her lips again. She exhales deeply. I groan as her hand travels down to my crotch. Her hand grazes over

my crotch, a jolt of electricity running through me. My breath hitches as her touch is soft and teasing, and it's driving me insane.

"Any," I whisper against her lips, my voice hoarse with desire. She looks up at me, her eyes mischievous like she knows exactly what she's doing. That smirk, the way she teases—it only makes me want her more.

"You're so easy to rile up," she murmurs, her fingers playing with the waistband of my sweatpants. Her cheeks are flushed, her lips swollen from our kiss, and she is panting lightly. I run my thumb against her bottom lip. She's so pretty; I can't ever get over it.

Sometimes, I want to throw a fit just to make her realize how much power she has over me. It's like she's taken every part of me and wrapped it around her finger without even trying. The worst part? I'm not mad about it. I'm grateful and maybe that's what scares me the most—how easily she can undo me with just a look, a touch, or even that quiet sigh she makes when she's lost in thought. She doesn't see what I see. She doesn't know how she turns my entire world upside down without even trying. It's in the way she's standing here, flushed and beautiful, not realizing that she's the most breathtaking thing in this room—hell, the most breathtaking thing in my life.

I pull her towards me, kissing her forehead before resting mine against hers. Our breaths mingle. "Stop teasing me, Firecracker," I say quietly. I place a soft kiss on her jawline.

"Why would I stop? It's too much fun watching you squirm," she says, her voice a melodic whisper.

I let out a breathy laugh, shaking my head. "You're incorrigible."

“Only with you,” she counters, the softness in her gaze making my heart race.

I frown and sniff. “Is something burning?” The smile on her face disappears, a look of panic taking over.

Anya quickly turns towards the stove and gasps. “Oh no! My veggies!” she exclaims, swiftly turning off the stove and fanning the air to disperse the smoke.

I chuckle at the sight of the blackened mess in the pan. “It’s all your fault. You distracted me.” She crosses her arms over her chest, scowling at me.

I step closer to her. Grinning lazily, I bend down slightly, wrapping one arm securely around her waist and the other beneath her knees, lifting her effortlessly off the ground.

Anya lets out a startled scream. “What are you doing?!” she cries, arms going around my shoulders instinctively.

I smirk and carry her into my room. She swats my chest but I do not react. I push the door with my leg and it closes with a bang.

“Now that you have burnt my dinner,” I whisper in her ear. “You owe me a meal.” I throw her on the bed. “And I am about to collect.” I grin.

Anya lands with a thud on the soft mattress, her hair fanning out around her head. She looks up at me with a mock glare, her face flushed. I lean down, my body hovering over hers. Her breath hitches as she takes me in, her eyes roaming over my face and body. They seem hazy, weighed down by desire.

“You could’ve just asked me normally,” she whispers, her voice low and husky. “No need for caveman tactics, captain.”

I chuckle my heart pounding in my chest. “Where’s the fun in that, Firecracker?” I say, my voice low and teasing. I run my hand along the side of her face, brushing her soft skin, and her lips part slightly in anticipation. Her chest rises and falls faster, and I can tell she’s trying to play it cool, but I can see the effect I’m having on her .

“I don’t need to ask when you want exactly what I want,” I murmur, my thumb brushing over her bottom lip. She bites it softly, her eyes darkening as she looks up at me through her lashes. Her hands find the front of my t-shirt and fist it tightly as she pulls me closer to her. Her breath quickens. “Anya,” I whisper, her name escaping my lips like a prayer. Her fingers tighten their grip on my shirt, pulling me down until our foreheads touch, the tips of our noses brushing. I can feel her breath, warm and shaky against my lips. I lean in, pressing a soft kiss against her lips, slow and deliberate. She melts into the kiss, her body arching up to meet mine. My hands slide down her sides, feeling the warmth of her skin beneath the thin fabric of her top. She sighs into the kiss, and that sound—that simple sound—makes me feel like I’m unraveling.

Her hands move from my shirt to my hair, tangling in it as she deepens the kiss, her nails grazing my scalp, sending a shiver down my spine. Anya runs her tongue along the seam of my lips, and I let out a groan. Her legs wrap around my hips, pulling me even closer. My hand grips her hip tightly, the other finding the hem of her top. I sit, pulling her up with me, and take off the top in one swift motion. She takes off my t-shirt, throwing it on the floor.

I reach out, my fingers tracing the delicate line of her collarbone, then drift lower, tracing the curve of her breasts over the fabric of her bra, watching the way her body reacts to my touch. She bites her bottom lip, her eyes fluttering shut for a second before she opens them again, her gaze, brimming with desire, meeting mine.

I press my lips to the hollow of her throat, my hands gently kneading her breasts. Her breath hitches, and she clings to me as I slide my thumb over the lace, teasing her sensitive skin. I can feel her pulse quickening beneath my lips, her heartbeat a frantic

rhythm that matches my own. “Daniel,” she whispers, her voice breathy and filled with need. Her hips roll against mine, making it hard for me to think straight.

“I need this out of sight,” I rasp. I grab the delicate lace and tear it away, the fabric ripping easily under my hands.

Her eyes widen in surprise, a gasp escaping her lips. “Daniel!” She breathes, her voice a mix of shock and need.

“I couldn’t wait,” I whisper. “I am a starved man, Firecracker.” I lower my head to capture her lips again, my hands roaming over her bare skin. The feel of her, warm and soft beneath my touch, sends a jolt of electricity through me. Her chest arches up, pressing against me, and I can’t help but groan at the sensation. She’s driving me insane, and she knows it.

Her hands are in my hair, pulling me closer, urging me on. I trace the line of her collarbone with my tongue, then dip lower, taking my time as I tease her, letting the anticipation build between us. Anya’s breathing grows ragged.

She’s squirming beneath me, her body reacting to every touch, every kiss, and it’s intoxicating. I press my palm flat against her stomach, feeling the slight tremble in her muscles. I finally reach her breasts. I take one nipple into my mouth, sucking gently at first, then harder, drawing a moan from her lips. Her fingers tighten in my hair, pulling me closer, and her legs wrap around my waist again. I groan against her skin, loving the way she responds to me, the way she’s completely undone in my arms.

“You’re perfect,” I whisper against her skin, my voice hoarse. “So beautiful.” She shivers at my words, her body reacting to the raw need in my voice.

I take a moment to look up at her—cheeks flushed, lips parted, eyes clouded with

desire. There's something about the way she looks at me that makes my heart race. I slide my hands down her sides, fingers grazing the waistband of her pants. Slowly, deliberately, I hook my fingers around the fabric and pull, watching her carefully to see every shift in her expression.

Her breath catches and she lifts her hips slightly to help, eyes never leaving mine. I take my time, savoring the moment, wanting to feel every second of this. She's looking at me like I'm the only thing that matters in this world and God, I don't think I've ever felt more alive.

"Get on your knees," I command, my voice low and rough with need. She bites her lip, a playful glint in her eyes, but she does as I ask, shifting onto her hands and knees, her back arching beautifully. I kneel behind her, letting my hands trail along the smooth curve of her back, and I spank her ass, a breathless gasp escapes her. I kiss the area as it turns red. My hands tremble as I roll on the condom. "God, Anya." I breathe. "You are a work of art."

I position myself behind her. I grip her hips, my fingers digging into her skin as I lean closer, kissing along her spine. She shivers under my touch, a soft moan escaping her lips. I slowly slide into her, the sensation overwhelming. She gasps, her body tightening around me. She lets out a sweet cry and I grunt in response. She pushes back against me as if urging me to move. I thrust my throbbing dick in her, rougher this time.

Her grip tightens on the bedsheets as she rotates her hips. "Fuck," I curse breathlessly. "You feel so fucking good." I reach out and circle her clit.

"Daniel," she cries out.

Our ragged breaths fill the room, mingling with the sweet gasps and moans escaping her lips. My hips slam against her with each thrust as I wrap my arms around her

middle, pulling her up and close to me, making her arch her back until her weight rests on me. My hand trails from her chest and settles on her neck, turning her head to get a glimpse of her face. “Look at how beautiful you are,” I rasp as I kiss her earlobe, “Look at how perfectly you take me.” I groan.

She shudders at my words. I can feel her body tensing, knowing she’s close to her release. My hand tightens slightly around her neck, pulling her closer to me. A loud moan escapes her, and her eyes roll back as she shatters under me. The sound of her pleasure drives me wild, and I move faster, my breath coming in ragged gasps. Her whimpers, each one more desperate than the last, fuel the fire within me. The way her body tenses and responds to each thrust, I feel myself getting closer, the tension in my muscles tightening. My own breath hitches and I can feel the heat building in me before I finally lose control, my head falling back as my release consumes me.

She collapses on the bed as soon as my arms slacken around her. I chuckle and brush a strand of her hair away from her face. I take off the condom and dispose of it. “I am hungry,” Anya whines.

I snigger. “I know that.” I smile softly at her as I lie down next to her, pulling her into me. She snuggles against me, a content sigh escaping her lips.

Her hand traces a lazy pattern on my stomach. “I am ordering food. What do you want?” I kiss the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her hair.

“Chinese would do.” She yawns and her eyes flutter closed. Someone is super tired.

“I have to feed you first, so don’t sleep, okay?” She lifts her head and nods, her eyes still closed. I peck her nose, and she smiles softly.

“Did you know you have a freckle right behind your ear?” I snuggle closer to her.

“Did you know you have twenty-two freckles on your body?” She smirks.

“How do you know?” My eyes widen. “Don’t tell me you counted them all. ”

“Of course, I did.” She shrugs and nuzzles into my neck. I chuckle. I think I love her. No, scratch that. I do love her deeply. I think I have loved her for a long time. It just took me time to admit it to myself. This woman is my whole world.

???

ANYA

“Why didn’t you wake me up earlier?!” I yell at him. I must have snoozed the alarm as always, and now that I have freshened up, this man has pulled me into bed again.

He yawns, his eyes still heavy with sleep. “Just stay here for a few more minutes, Firecracker.” He sighs as he pulls me closer to him. His morning voice is so hot. I don’t think I will ever get over it.

“Captain.” I pull away, intertwine our fingers, and kiss the back of his hand. “That’s all I want,” I say softly. “But I really can’t miss this class. The professor is going to announce important details about the exam.” I peck his lips. His grip on me loosens, and I take the opportunity to slide out of the bed. “And one of us has to know these things so you can pass,” I smirk and he chuckles lightly.

I shiver at the sudden loss of warmth. “Okay, I am letting you go,” he says quietly and opens his eyes. “But only if you promise to meet me in the library.” His face twists in frustration as he rubs his eyes. “I have to study, too.” He pouts, “Coach said that I need to pass all my subjects or he will bench me.” I gasp. “Don’t worry. I am too talented. He can’t afford to shun me.” He grins lazily.

“How humble of you, captain.” I chuckle.

“It’s confidence, Firecracker.” He winks at me.

I roll my eyes, a small smile playing on my lips. “Confidence...or arrogance?” I shoot back, pulling on a hoodie and stuffing my books into my bag.

He sits up, his hair a mess, the morning sunlight streaming in through the window and casting a warm glow on his bare chest. Heat pools in my stomach and I have to remind myself not to get distracted.

“Hey, I prefer the term ‘unapologetically sure of myself.’” He smirks.

He throws the covers off, revealing his toned body and walks over to me. He wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me closer and resting his chin on my shoulder. “Admit it. You love my unapologetic confidence,” he murmurs, running his nose along the side of my neck.

I let out a small gasp at the sensation, my heart rate quickening. “Fine,” I whisper, my voice hitching. “I might find it...a little attractive.”

He hums against my skin, his breath warm and his hand slowly sliding under my hoodie. He grabs my waist, his thumb tracing patterns over my stomach. “A little, huh?” He teases, his lips ghosting over my jawline.

His touch lights a fire within me and I suppress the urge to abandon my class and stay here with him all day.

He grins, knowing exactly how much his touch is affecting me. “You’re thinking about blowing off class, aren’t you?” he murmurs in my ear, his hand sliding up to the small of my back.

I shiver at the contact, my mind filled with visions of staying here in bed with him all day instead of suffering through a boring lecture. The idea is incredibly tempting.

“But don’t,” he whispers. “I do not want you feeling guilty about it later.” He’s right. I sigh. It scares me sometimes, how easily he can read my mind, predict my behaviors, but it also gives me a sense of contentment that there’s someone in this

goddamn world who can understand me so well.

“Now, be a good girl and attend your class.” He smacks my ass. “And your captain will bring coffee for you after class, okay?”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t help but smile. “Alright, captain. I’ll be a good girl for you,” I say, faking a sarcastic tone.

“I will get going then.” I announce, but he doesn’t budge. “Only if someone leaves me.” I can sense his reluctance as he finally lets me go and stomps toward the bed. “You are acting like a child right now.” I giggle.

He flops down on the bed, dramatically flinging his arms out to the sides and pouting like a little kid. “This is your fault. You’re too tempting,” he grumbles.

I chuckle, amused by his childish behavior. “Oh, I’m sorry for being too irresistible,” I tease, walking over to the bed and leaning down to press a kiss to his forehead.

He looks up at me, his eyes still holding a hint of grumpiness. “You should never be sorry, even when you are wrong,” he says, trying to maintain a stern facade.

“What makes you think I will ever be wrong?” I cock an eyebrow.

He chuckles. “You are right.” I laugh and pick up my bag. “Text me when you get there, okay?” I nod. I open the door and throw him a kiss. He pretends to catch the kiss and place it on his lips before rolling his eyes.

“Just go already before I change my mind and pull you back into bed,” he says, throwing a pillow in my direction and running after me. I giggle. “Oh, no.” I sprint but stop in my tracks as I see Louis and Ethan smirking at me.

“Look who’s doing the walk of shame,” Louis teases. My eyes widen. I feel like a deer caught in headlights. I feel heat rising up my neck .

“It’s not a walk of shame.” Daniels comes beside me and throws his arm around my shoulder. “It’s a walk of satisfaction.” He winks at me. I smack his arm as I gasp softly.

“I am running late, guys.” I smile. “Have a good day.” I rush out of the door. What is wrong with him? I keep my hand on my chest to calm my heartbeat before hurrying down the hallway.

The teasing remarks from Louis and Daniel echo in my mind, causing a blush to creep up my cheeks. The walk to the college campus from his apartment is approximately two minutes, and that’s something I really like. It gives me the opportunity to get up late and still be on time. Though I am late today. I sigh. I love my sleep.

The sun shines bright, casting a golden hue over everything, and I take a deep breath, letting the crisp morning air clear my mind. I love this time of day. I look around at the crowd of students walking on the campus. The place is alive with chatter and laughter.

As I reach the lecture hall, I spot Sophia, her face buried in her phone. I creep up on her silently, and when I am near enough, I suddenly shout, “Boo!”

“Woah!” she exclaims, her hand on her chest. “What the fuck, Anya? You scared me.”

“That was the point.” I smile, taking a seat beside her. I take out my phone to quickly send a text to Daniel.

“You are glowing.” Soph nudges me. I roll my eyes but can’t suppress a grin.

“I know.” I shrug. “It’s called being well-rested.”

“If you say so.” Soph smirks. I note how she doesn’t ask for details and I am grateful for that, because she did once, and I was so flustered. I am not someone who can discuss my sex life openly.

I guess that’s a part of our upbringing. Indians don’t casually talk about sex. I mean, Siya is the one and only person I feel comfortable sharing anything with because we have played together and have been together since we were in diapers, but we don’t usually do so unless we are concerned about something.

“Are you ready for this? I hear today’s topic is going to be a real snooze-fest,” I say, changing the subject.

Sophia rolls her eyes, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “As if! I’m always ready, especially if it means I can zone out for an hour.”

I smirk. “You’re the queen of zoning out. I’m surprised you don’t have a crown for it.”

“Maybe I should get one. I’d wear it proudly,” she quips, leaning back in her chair. As the professor starts the lecture, I focus on the slides projected on the screen, taking notes in my notebook for a change. I usually do that when I find the subject or the topic boring because it helps me pay attention; otherwise, I take notes on my laptop.

Halfway through the lecture, my phone buzzes again. I sneak a glance, trying to be discreet.

Daniel:

How's class? I miss your face already.

Coffee's brewing for you.

Can't wait to see you, firecracker! ? ?

I can't help but grin as I type back quickly.

About as thrilling as watching paint dry.

Wish you were here to entertain me.

Can't wait for coffee! ??

"Tsk, tsk." Soph shakes her head slowly. I swat her arm. Now, I hope this lecture ends soon.

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DANIEL

“Here you go.” I extend the water bottle toward Anya. She glares at me but drinks it anyway and I mentally applaud myself for successfully making her drink water. “Good girl.” I pat her head and give her the coffee mug. She pulls a face at me and snatches it from my hand. I chuckle. “Don’t be mad, Firecracker.” I pout.

She ignores me and takes a sip. I take her bag from her shoulder. She sighs in contentment and grins at me. “This is heaven. Thanks.”

“Welcome back.” I snigger. “The other personality of yours was being mean to me.” She smacks my arm, but I dodge it, intertwining our fingers instead. The students passing by eye her and I glare at them. A girl smiles and waves at me. I look at Anya. She is staring daggers at her, and I chuckle. She looks up at me, pulling me by my collar, and places a kiss on my lips. I smile against her lips.

She smiles slyly at the girl. The girl coughs, smiles sheepishly, and moves on .

“You look very hot when you are jealous, Firecracker,” I whisper in her ear.

“I was not jealous.” She scoffs.

“Good, you should not be.” I kiss her earlobe. “I belong to you.”

She shivers at the touch, her eyes shining with a mix of annoyance and delight. “You better remember that,” she says, attempting to sound serious but failing miserably. “Let’s go,” she says, her voice firm but laced with that playful edge I adore. I can’t

help but grin as I follow her lead. There's something about the way she takes charge that ignites a thrill in me. "Are you going to walk behind me the whole time?" She glances back, raising an eyebrow.

"Not a chance, Firecracker," I reply, stepping up beside her. "I was just enjoying the view." She rolls her eyes, but I catch the hint of a smile tugging at her lips.

"What are you going to study?" she asks.

"Whatever you teach me." I shrug.

"I am not teaching you anything. If I do that, I will never be able to study myself." She scoffs. I gasp playfully.

"Bullshit," I say, "You have to teach me, baby." I smile sheepishly. "I have no idea how I will pass otherwise." I lean in and whisper in her ear, "I promise I will pay you back." I wink at her.

"Get your mind out of the gutter." She shakes her head. "Plus, I can get that from you even if I don't tutor you." She smiles at me.

"Ah, you know me so well." I pout.

I stop outside the library and bend down on my knee. "What the fuck are you doing?!" she scans the surroundings urgently, seeming mortified.

"I will do anything you want, Firecracker." I kiss the back of her hand. "But please, help me pass this exam." Her eyes widen. She looks around and smiles fakely at the people staring at us .

"Fine, get up," she grits out, narrowing her eyes at me. She is going to kill me, but I

am enjoying the blush on her cheeks.

I get to my feet. “That was easy.” I smirk.

She takes my hand and pulls me inside the library. The quietness of the room envelops us. Anya leads me toward a secluded corner, away from the other students, her grip on my hand tightening. “You are hopeless, you know that?” she huffs.

I flash her a cheeky grin. “Just keeping things interesting, Firecracker. You wouldn’t want it any other way.”

She rolls her eyes but can’t hide the hint of a smile creeping in. “Alright, let’s get down to business.” Taking her bag from my hand, she takes out a textbook and opens it, the pages crinkling softly in the silence. “We are going to study Economics because it scares me,” she says.

“I have beef with Economics now.” I frown.

“You’re mad.” She laughs. “But cute.” She kisses my palm and I smile. She takes a deep breath, flipping to a page filled with graphs and charts. “Let’s start with supply and demand. It’s the foundation of everything in Economics.”

“Right,” I say, nodding seriously.

“Are you aware of the basics?” she asks. I nod. “Okay, then I am going to move on to the elasticity of demand and supply, okay?”

I try my best to keep up as she explains. I find my mind wandering, not just to the material but to how good it feels to be here with her. The way she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, the spark in her eyes when she gets excited about a topic—it all pulls me in. She flips to another page, and we dive deeper into the subject. As she

explains concepts with her animated gestures, I can't help but admire how passionate she is. It makes me want to pay more attention. She is so dedicated.

"Daniel!" she snaps, bringing me back to reality. "Are you even listening to me? "

"Of course," I exclaim. "That's what I was born for."

"Shut up and focus." She rolls her eyes.

"Will it help if I say I was focused?" I smile sheepishly. "But on you."

"Daniel!" she exclaims, exasperated. I raise my hands in surrender.

"I do not think anything else will go in your head anymore." She shakes her head. "Twenty-five-minute study sessions will work best for you. Just an advice," she says, picking up the textbook and putting it in her bag.

"You don't give advice," I brush off a strand of hair from her face, "You order me." I wink and she gives me a bored look.

I take her bag before she can. "Thanks." She smiles.

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DANIEL

“Anya, I swear to God, this is not what I had in mind when I said I would do anything you say,” I whine.

“Hold still,” she scolds. “Besides, I had to get revenge for you blackmailing me into teaching you,” she smirks.

“My nose is itching.” I huff and she chuckles, amusement evident on her face. She applies the face mask as I train my eyes on her, noticing how adorable she looks with her eyebrows scrunched up and her tongue poking out in concentration.

She steps back after she is done and giggles evilly, shooting me a wink. I love her too much to go through this tedious process because otherwise, I would never do this shit. I want to tell her, right now, how much I love her, but I can’t. What if I make her uncomfortable? I have no doubt she likes me, but I am not sure if she loves me yet.

“You’re enjoying this way too much,” I grumble, secretly loving the way her cute smirk lights up her face.

She laughs, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Oh, come on, captain. It’s not that bad. You’ll thank me later when your skin is glowing.” She gently taps over the mask, her fingers lightly brushing against my temples before she bops my nose. I shake my head, smiling like an idiot.

I can’t see her anymore, but I can feel her presence close by. The scent of lavender and vanilla—her signature perfume—wafts around me, oddly comforting despite my

grumbling.

“How long am I sentenced to this beauty prison?” I ask, trying to sound annoyed but failing miserably.

“Just fifteen minutes,” Anya replies and I can hear the smile in her voice. “Think you can handle it, tough guy?”

I let out an exaggerated groan. “I don’t know, babe. I might need you to hold my hand through this torture.”

“You’re such a dork,” she says, but her voice drips with affection. A moment later, I feel her hand slip into mine, giving it a squeeze.

We fall into a comfortable silence for a moment, broken only by Anya’s occasional giggle, probably at how ridiculous I look.

I can hear the rustle of what sounds to be chains and keys and then a soft click. “What are you doing?” I frown.

“Just capturing the moment!” she declares.

“Anya!” I exclaim. “I can’t believe you’re documenting this. You’re evil.” I laugh, shaking my head.

“Only a little,” she quips back and I can picture her cheeky smile.

“Don’t show it to anyone, please,” I beg.

“I won’t. This is only for me,” she says. “So that I can blackmail you if you ever try to break up with me.” She lets out a manic laugh.

“If you think I will ever break up with you, Firecracker—” I take off the mask.

“It’s not—” I press my lips to hers, cutting off her protest. Her lips are soft against mine and I hold the back of her neck, pulling her toward me to deepen the kiss. Her fingers weave into my hair and I can’t help but smile against her lips. “--- then you are crazy because I am obsessed with you. I can’t think of a life without you, Anya,” I say softly as I rest my forehead against hers.

Anya’s breath catches and for a moment, she’s silent. I can feel her heartbeat racing, matching my own. When she finally speaks, her voice is soft and brimming with emotion, “I hope you mean that because you can’t get rid of me.” She pecks my cheek and then twists her face. “You wasted that mask, you know that?”

“Worth it.” I shrug. “Can we please stop this now?” I pout.

“Okay.” She giggles. “But we are watching a movie then,” she exclaims. “And I get to choose which one.” She raises an eyebrow as if daring me to protest.

I can’t help but grin at her excitement. “Alright, Firecracker. You win. Movie night it is.”

“Yes!” Anya pumps her fist in victory, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “I hope you’re ready for a crime doc marathon.”

I groan playfully even as my heart swells at her enthusiasm. “As long as I get to cuddle with you, I’ll suffer through anything. That reminds me. Aren’t you going to take out your profiling notebook?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Huh?” she asks, her face tilting in confusion. I chuckle at her confused expression, finding it utterly adorable.

“You know, that notebook you always have with you when you watch crime docs. The one where you jot down all your theories and ‘profile’ the criminals. You told me about it?”

“Oh!” Realization dawns over her face, lips turning into a ‘o’. “You are right. I do not have it.” She frowns. “We will be having a rom-com marathon instead, Mr. Captain,” she says, snuggling into me.

“Bollywood?” I grin and place a kiss on her shoulder.

Anya flips her hair. “Of course! Nothing beats Bollywood rom-coms. They are the best.”

I chuckle, pulling Anya closer to me. “Can’t argue with that, Firecracker. Bollywood it is.”

We settle on the bed and wrap up in a cozy blanket. She searches for a movie, biting her lip in concentration as the light from the screen illuminates her face. How the fuck is she so beautiful? It’s a mystery to me.

“Found one!” she exclaims. “I am going to re-watch Dear Zindagi .” She rests her head on my shoulder. “It’s not romance. I would say—” She knits her eyebrows. “---it’s more of a slice-of-life, drama-comedy kind of movie.” Her eyes widen. “But it has Shahrukh Khan! Can’t go wrong with him, right?”

“I know.” I smile. “This is the only movie I haven’t watched from your recommendations.”

Anya beams, her eyes sparkling. “Good. Let’s watch it together then!” I brush a strand of her hair away from her face. “We can watch Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara after this.” I twist my face in confusion. “Again a Bollywood masterpiece. The title

basically means YOLO.” She shrugs. “It has Hrithik Roshan. Dude is so handsome. One of my childhood crushes.” She sighs. I laugh at her animated expression.

“Okay.” I kiss her cheek. “Let’s begin!” I announce. She shakes her head, smiling as she starts the movie.

???

ANYA

The energy in the gymnasium is electric. Ten thousand screaming students and parents. I wonder how he manages to stay focused amidst all this chaos. I would be having an anxiety attack if so many people were watching me. But I have finally started to understand the enthusiasm people have for a sport after I started watching his previous matches and learned a bit about basketball. I'm perched on the edge of my seat in the front row. I am halfway up to my seat as Daniel aims for a three-pointer, jumping up when he effortlessly nails it.

I sit back again, restless with excited energy. "For someone who doesn't like sports—" Siya grins. "---you are enjoying yourself."

She's right, but now I have a reason not to dislike it. It means the world to him. This game—it's a passion that fuels him, shapes him, and defines a big part of who he is. And I have seen how driven he is. He doesn't just play for the wins; he plays for the love of the game, for the sheer joy it brings him.

And I want to be there for him, supporting him in every way I can. Watching him out there on the court, I feel a surge of pride. This isn't just a game. It's his arena, his stage, and I'm so lucky to be a part of it. I love hearing him talk about wanting to go pro, the way his eyes light up with excitement. I want to be there every step of the way, cheering him on through the victories and the setbacks.

"I think I love it now." I grin widely.

"Oh my God." Soph groans playfully. "Stop smiling like that. You are so in love,"

she whines.

“It’s disgustingly cute,” Siya mutters.

I can’t help but beam at them. “I do love him.” I admit it out loud for the first time.

Columbia University is trailing by ten points with two minutes left on the clock. Daniel signals Ethan to move into position on the offensive play. Louis passes the ball to Ethan, but an opposing player intercepts his movement, forcing him to lose control. The team loses possession. Oh no. That’s not a good sign.

He passes the ball to the captain of the opposing team, but Daniel jumps high and taps the ball. The ball lands with Theo this time, our center. The crowd grows even wilder and I can’t help but grin foolishly. That’s my boyfriend , I want to shout, but I restrain myself.

Theo passes the ball to Louis. He looks for an open man. Daniel runs towards the hoop. The roar of the crowd swells, drowning out everything else as Daniel’s feet leave the ground.

I hold the Ganesha pendant on my necklace.

Please help him.

“He will be fine.” Siya squeezes my hand.

“I know.” I smile reassuringly. I believe in him completely, but sometimes we all need prayers, right?

He slams the ball through the hoop with a force that sends vibrations through the floor. “YES!” I scream, jumping out of my seat, my heart racing. Daniel lands

gracefully, his expression a mixture of fierce determination and joy, and I can't help but cheer his name. Soph leans in, grinning. "Okay, I officially take back everything I said! You're like a superfan now!"

"I'm just a girlfriend who's proud of her boyfriend!" I reply, unable to hide my smile. "We won," I exclaim and exhale deeply, a lump forming in my throat. The joy is overwhelming, and I realize just how much this victory means.

He doesn't have to leave basketball now. I watch as Daniel joins his teammates, their arms thrown around each other, slapping backs and exchanging high-fives. He breaks the huddle and looks toward the crowd, scanning it.

When his eyes meet mine, I wave at him excitedly. My heart races as he weaves through the throng of people, his focus unwavering. I can't help but admire the way he moves, so confident and alive. He's dripping with sweat, hair plastered to his forehead, his chest rising and falling with every breath. He grins widely. My eyes burn with unshed tears.

Without a word, he pulls me into his arms, lifting me off the ground in a tight embrace. I cling to him, feeling the rise and fall of his chest against my own. I bury my face in his neck, breathing him in, feeling his skin slick with sweat. I can hear his pulse racing, his heart beating fast. "You won," I whisper. My voice wavers. "I am so proud of you."

He kisses my hair. "Thank you, baby." He puts me down, his grin disappearing as he looks at me. "Are you crying?" He frowns.

"No." I laugh. A lone tear escapes my eye. "I am just very happy." I hug his torso.

"Well." He kisses my cheek where the tear fell. "Find another fucking way of being happy," he huffs. "Because this one is hurting me." He rests his forehead against

mine.

I chuckle lightly, but my throat feels thick with so many emotions. “Okay, guys.” Soph pokes me in the ass and I gasp. “People are watching. If you plan on keeping your relationship hidden, you are not doing a good job.” She smiles sheepishly. Has it ever been hidden? I don't think so considering how open he is about it. I smile.

Daniel lowers his head slowly and looks into my eyes before he presses his lips on mine. His tongue parts my lips as he kisses me deeply. “I guess that will be enough of an answer.” He smirks against my lips before pulling away. “Right?” He cocks an eyebrow at Sophia.

“More than enough, I think.” She shakes her head but grins widely.

“I will go get changed,” he says, pecking my lips. I nod. I watch him stride away, but he turns on his heels and jogs back.

“What’s wrong?” I frown.

“I just wanted to remind you that you kept your part of the deal.” He leans down and mutters in my ear, “So, I will keep mine. I am going to make you scream my name.” His words make me shudder. “You look beautiful in my jersey, by the way.” He winks and jogs off again.

I stand there, heart racing, my cheeks flushed. “What just happened?” I whisper to myself, still reeling from his playful confidence.

“Are you okay?” Siya asks, her eyes wide with amusement.

“Your blush makes me curious about what he said.” Soph nudges me. I swat her arm.

“Let’s leave her alone.” Siya chuckles.

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DANIEL

“Alright, who’s up for some beer pong?” Ethan calls out, slamming down his drink. He’s already a little tipsy, his usual shyness nowhere to be seen.

“Count me in!” Louis shouts, pumping his fist in the air. He’s grinning like a fool. It’s not a huge party, but it’s wild with jocks and cheerleaders around. It was Caleb’s idea of partying. It was necessary, according to him. Whether we lost or won, it would be a good stress buster, but I know all he wanted was drinks and chicks. The moment Elsa entered the party, he vanished. I swear the tension between them is so insane. I am rooting for him, but I am not sure if it is going anywhere.

“Are you going to play?” I ask Anya. She shakes her head.

“I am going to keep the scores with Siya,” she says, squeezing Siya’s hand. I can see the look of gratitude on her friend’s face. I love how protective my girlfriend is of the people she cares about. I’ve gathered that Siya isn’t comfortable in big groups.

“Fair enough,” I say, giving Anya a quick peck on the cheek before I grab a few cups and start setting up the game. “But you two better keep it fair!”

“Just watch us!” Anya replies with a teasing grin.

Sophia and Louis are against me and Ethan. Ethan goes first. He grins confidently as he aims his ball, but it hits the rim of the cup and bounces off. Louis jeers loudly. Ethan sneers at him, already reaching for another ball.

“For a basketball player, you sure know how to take your shots.” Sophia smirks.

“Woah, dude, that was hard,” I tease. He glares at me. Sophia snorts leaning against the table, her eyes sparkling with mischief. She tosses the ball with a smirk, and it glides through the air before landing perfectly in one of the cups.

Louis cheers while Ethan lets out a string of curses. I chuckle. This is going to be too easy. Ethan aims the ball again, his brows furrowing in focus, but the ball hits the rim again with a soft thump.

Sophia snorts with a mocking smile. “I guess basketball skills don’t transfer to beer pong.”

I take my shot, aiming carefully and tossing the ball with finesse. It lands in a cup with a satisfying splash.

Ethan’s eyes narrow. “It’s just not my day.” He grins confidently. “But I have skills beyond the basketball court, too. I could show you some.” He winks at her.

“Ethan, please behave,” Anya says, amused.

Ethan glances over at Anya and grins. “Alright, alright, I’ll behave. But only because you asked, Anya.” He winks at her, smirking at me. I shoot him a glare.

Sophia scoffs. “Oh, like I would be interested in your so-called ‘skills.’”

The game goes on for a while. It’s clear that we are definitely losing. Sophia is too good at this; she hasn’t missed at all. It’s my turn now. I pick up the ball, but before I can aim, Anya says, “Can I try?”

“I can never say no to you, baby. Go ahead.” I grin lazily, stepping back and giving

the ball to her. Anya takes it and grins at me, confident and sexy. She steps up to the table, looking like she owns the game. She aims the ball, focusing on the cups in front of her, her body pressed close, her ass rubbing against my dick, which sends a spark of heat through me. I try to keep my focus, but it's impossible to ignore the teasing grin she throws my way.

“Oops, looks like I missed,” she says with a playful smirk, as the ball bounces off the rim of a cup.

I raise an eyebrow at her, my voice low, so that no one hears. “That was no accident.”

Anya steps aside, “We are going to get snacks. Do you guys want anything?” she asks, her eyes raking over me.

I watch as Anya walks away with Siya, her hips swaying with every step she takes. She's holding Siya's hand protectively. My eyes are still glued to her. I try to focus on the game, but it's impossible with the way my dick is throbbing. She really will be the death of me.

“Come on, dude. It's your turn,” Louis says, a yawn escaping his lips. I tear my gaze away from Anya, take the shot, and miss it.

“What happened? Missing your lucky charm?” Louis sneers.

I glare at him. He raises his hands in surrender. I scan through the crowd, but she's nowhere to be seen. Her phone is with me. I do not trust the guys here. I will have to find her.

The alcohol is messing with my head. I narrow my eyes to see better through the crowd. I finally spot her across the room, standing close to a tall guy with tousled hair and a charming grin. My blood runs cold. It's Henry—the guy Anya went on that

blind date with. I force myself to breathe. She's just talking to him. But I can't ignore the sudden spike of jealousy as I watch her laugh at something Henry says. Dammit, it's ridiculous how much the man getting to me right now .

As much as I try to tell myself that there's no reason to worry, I can't help the way my heart clenches as I watch them talk. I force myself to focus on the game, but my mind is fixated on Anya. Even though I can't hear their conversation, I can't help but wonder what they're talking about.

"I quit," I grit out, my frustration bubbling over. Louis raises an eyebrow, clearly confused. I push my way through the crowd, my heart pounding. The laughter and chatter fade into the background as I focus solely on Anya. As I approach, I catch snippets of their conversation, her laughter ringing out like music, and it only makes my gut twist tighter.

"Hey baby," I call out, trying to keep my tone casual. Her head snaps in my direction, surprise lighting up her face.

"Dan—" she starts to say, but I cut her off, my gaze flickering to Henry. He smiles at me slightly.

"I will excuse myself," he says, leaving us alone. I watch Henry walk away, the tension in my shoulders easing slightly.

"He—" I do not let her finish. I hold her hand and pull her into me. She smiles at me sneakily. I clench my jaw. I can't lose control right now; not here. I need to get us out of here.

I guide her through the packed room, our hands intertwined tightly. The space is filled with drunk people, their laughter and loud chatter overwhelming. I push through the crowd, my grip on her hand like a vice. I turn to look at her and she grins,

her eyes gleaming with a playful light. She knows exactly what she's doing, and I am doing everything in my power to keep my cool. The journey to my room feels like a lifetime, the noise around us a distant hum. Finally, I push open the door to my room, letting go of her hand to close and lock the door behind us.

I turn and pin her between the door and my body, my hands resting on either sides of her head, trapping her in place. My eyes rake over her, taking in the way my jersey engulfs her entirely. "Looks like you were having a good time out there," I murmur, my voice low and strained.

She shivers. "Jealous?" she raises an eyebrow, her voice coming out a little breathless.

I smack her ass and pull her closer to me. My hand slides under her skirt. My eyes widen when I am met with smooth, slick skin. I squeeze her ass and she gasps. "No panties in public, Firecracker?" My eyes darken, and I lean in to whisper, "You have been pushing my limits tonight, baby." I nibble at her neckline, and a needy moan escapes her lips.

"So..." She breathes, her voice barely above a whisper, teasing. "What are you going to do about it, captain?"

I grip her thighs, lifting her and carrying her across the room. Her eyes widen as she sees herself in the mirror. I smirk. "I think it's time I remind you who you belong to," I murmur.

"As much as I like you in my jersey—" I kiss her nape. "---I would like it better on the floor right now." Anya's breath hitches as she gazes into the mirror, her eyes meeting mine through the reflection. I smirk, enjoying the way her body responds to me.

Slowly, I slide my hands under the hem of the jersey, my fingers brushing against her warm skin. She shudders under my touch. Her eyes darken as I lift the fabric higher and take it off swiftly, leaving her bare except for her pink bra.

I unhook the bra, the straps falling down her shoulders. It slides down smoothly, exposing her breasts. My hands are on her instantly, my fingers grazing over her nipples, pinching them. She gasps softly and her head falls back on my shoulder. She squirms against me, her breathing growing heavy.

I can feel her pulse quickening under my touch. My fingers move lower, brushing over her stomach before gripping her hips tightly, pulling her back against me. "Tell me," I murmur, my lips brushing against her ear. "Who do you belong to?"

She gasps, her body trembling slightly. "Only you," she whispers, her voice barely audible but filled with need.

"Good." My voice is dark with satisfaction, my hand sliding down her thigh, gripping her soft skin possessively. "Because you're mine, Anya. Every inch of you."

I unzip my jeans slowly, my eyes locking onto hers as I give a quiet command, "Stay right here." I rush to the bathroom, urgency building inside me. My hands fumble for the condom, and I quickly prepare myself, heart pounding. As I return to her, I can't help but stroke myself once, the need growing stronger. I step back to her, pausing just as the tip of me brushes against her, the heat between us almost unbearable.

"Take my dick like a good girl, okay?" I push her against the mirror, bending her slightly to get a good view of her pussy. Her nipples harden with the contact of the cold mirror. "So wet for me aren't you, Firecracker?" I hold her hair in one hand, and my other wraps around her neck as I slide partially into her. I kiss her shoulder blade, slamming into her warm, pulsating pussy. She yelps.

I can feel her body tremble with pleasure as she takes me. I lean forward to whisper into her ear, my breath hot against her skin, “You like that, don’t you, baby?” I murmur, my voice rough and raspy. “You like watching your boyfriend fuck you, don’t you, Firecracker?”

She moans loudly in approval and I increase my rhythm. “Only I can touch you like this, baby. Only me. Do you understand?” I murmur darkly as I nibble on her throat, biting it gently.

“Daniel!” she screams at the top of her lungs. I fuck her harder, squeezing her ass. The sound of our bodies slapping together echoes in the room. I look at her tits bouncing so perfectly as I pound her against the mirror.

“You’re a goddess, Anya,” I pant. “And you are mine to worship.” I slip a hand between us, massaging her clit. She tightens and pulsates around me, finding her release as she screams my name again.

I continue to thrust into her, adding a finger. She mewls. Her lips part, and she bites it, her eyes rolling back in pleasure as she shudders beneath me. “You feel so fucking good, Firecracker,” I grunt.

“Daniel,” she screams again as she comes for the second time tonight.

I slam into her sloppily now, my hands grabbing her tits for support as I fuck her. I groan as my abdomen tightens. I thrust into her one last time, growling, my climax rolling over me with a final thrust.

I collapse against her, both of us panting heavily, the heat of the moment still pulsing between us. Anya leans her head back against my shoulder, a soft sigh escaping her lips as she tries to catch her breath. I can feel her heart racing, and it matches the frantic rhythm of my own.

“Did I break you?” I tease, a lazy smirk spreading across my face as I gently brush a strand of hair from her sweaty forehead.

“Not yet,” she replies.

I frown. “No? But seriously, was I too rough?” I kiss her cheek.

“Shut up. Don’t ruin this.” She rolls her eyes. “You were incredible.” She blushes.

I chuckle. “I didn’t know you like to be railed hard. Will keep that in mind.” I wink.

Anya nudges me playfully, her blush deepening. I pick her up, her legs wrapping around me, and I groan. “I am going to take care of you.” I kiss her forehead gently as I lay her down on the bed. “And then I am going to feed you. You’re definitely hungry, aren’t you?” I murmur, smiling at her softly. She grins and nods at me. Wrapping her arms around me, she nuzzles closer to me.

“I am yours, captain.” She kisses my shirt and looks up at me. “You do not need to be jealous of anyone.” She smirks. “But if this is how I get treated, I don’t mind some healthy jealousy.”

I press my lips on hers, softly kissing her. She moans into the kiss. “Don’t do that.” She giggles.

I press a kiss to her hair. “Siya wanted to leave. I wanted to go with her, but she insisted I stay.” She smiles slyly. “I met him at the door while I was coming back. I went to see her off.” She rubs circles over my t-shirt. “He was just saying he is happy we got together,” she says. “He said—” She chuckles. “---the moment you barged in on that date and behaved like a mannerless caveman, he knew we were going to be together.” She smiles. “Although he did say that if we ever break up, he will gladly date me.” She smirks.

“That’s not a possibility.” I clench my jaw. “We are endgame.”

Her eyes soften. “Good to know we are on the same page, captain,” she says, pecking my nose.

I intertwine our fingers. “Anya,” I say silently, my eyes closing in contentment. “I got scouted by the Philadelphia 76ers.”

She gasps. “Are you serious?” I open my eyes. She’s sitting up now, her eyes sparkling. She looks ethereal and stunned. I chuckle.

“Yes, very serious.” I squish her face. She throws her arms around me.

“I am so happy for you.” She squeals. I hug her back, running my hand over her soft back. “I am so proud of you.” She presses a gentle kiss to my forehead, her expression so painfully soft. Today is really the best day ever.

???

ANYA

“When did you learn how to bake?” I ask, genuinely surprised. “You’re already a brilliant chef, but now baking, too?” I raise an eyebrow, patting her lightly on the back.

Siya smiles, her cheeks reddening. “Zeke taught me.” She looks at me, and her eyes sparkle. “I was not feeling good, and I ran into him.” She chuckles. “He was baking a cake for an experiment.” She shakes her head. “I am his taste buddy.” It’s been so long since I have seen her talk about someone else with such enthusiasm. Her smile is so warm, not at all fake, and she looks genuinely happy.

I do not want her to get hurt. It would break my heart to see her crumble again. It took her so much courage to get up on her feet, to come back out into this world. I am so proud of her.

“Siya—” She rushes to the baking oven. My words die in my throat. I watch her silently for a moment, observing the way her movements become a bit hurried and chaotic. It’s clear that she’s trying to avoid the conversation, but I know better than to push her too hard .

So instead, I walk up to stand beside her, observing the cake in the oven. I give her a few moments to compose herself before speaking. “It looks amazing,” I offer, hoping to put her at ease.

“Thank you.” She smiles warmly, her smile bringing bringing one to my face. “Taste it?” She offers me a slice of the chocolate cake.

“Will I ever say no to food?” I smile smugly. She giggles. I take the plate from her hand and savor the rich, velvety cake. As I chew, I can’t help but grin. “This is incredible, Siya!” I exclaim.

“Really?” She frowns.

“I would never lie to you. I love it!” Her cheeks flush with pride.

“Thank you,” she says quietly. My phone pings. I reach out for where it rests on the counter. It’s Daniel.

Daniel:

Will pick you up at 10 AM tomorrow

Can’t wait for you to steal my breath away ??? ?

I gasp. “Oh no!” I look at Siya. My eyes widen and my jaw almost drops to the floor. How the fuck did I forget? Oh god no!

“What is it?” Siya rushes to my side.

“I am going to meet Daniel’s father tomorrow,” I inform her. “And I forgot about it.” I look into her eyes. “I need your help.” Grabbing her hand, I drag her to my room, closing the door behind me.

My heart races. “So, what is wrong?” She raises an eyebrow.

“There are so many things I haven’t figured out. For starters, what should I wear?” I pace around, biting my nails. She chuckles. I glare at her. The audacity .

“Anya.” Siya holds me in place, still smiling. “He likes you.” She shakes her head. “No, he loves you. It will not matter to him if his father likes you or not. Can’t you see it?” My fingers fidget with the chain of my necklace, twisting it in my hands. She is right. He did say so, too, but I do not want his father to not like me.

Back in India, meeting parents is a huge deal. It’s not just a casual dinner. It’s like asking for approval for marriage. It carries so much weight. What if they don’t think I’m good enough? “If he doesn’t like me— what if that changes how Daniel feels about me?” I murmur, running my hands across my face.

Siya furrows her brow. “That’s rude, Anya.” She frowns. “Don’t say that to him. He will be hurt. He does love you. It’s visible on his face, and it means you are doubting his feelings. Don’t do that.” She pushes me onto the bed and folds her hands. “I can understand the anxiousness.” She chuckles softly. “I can understand it better than anyone I would say.” A painful expression passes on her face. I squeeze her hand gently, offering silent support.

“I am definitely not one to give love advice,” she says. I glare at her and she smiles sheepishly, sitting beside me. “But when I see you two—” she inhales deeply. “---I wish to have what you two have one day.” She looks me in the eyes. “And, Anya, you are strong and beautiful. It’s very difficult to not like you.” She rests her head on my shoulder, linking her arm with mine.

“Not as much as you, Siya.” She looks at me, her eyes shining with gratitude. I smile. “I will ask for his suggestion.” I pick up my phone and text him.

What should I wear?

My phone pings almost immediately.

Daniel:

Something comfy

I roll my eyes.

Daniel:

Something easily accessible. ??

I gasp. Siya sniggers beside me. “He has no shame at all.” I laugh, shaking my head.

I send him an eye roll emoji and throw my phone back on the bed. “Okay, so let’s do this,” I say, opening my wardrobe. “I don’t want it to be too casual, but I don’t want to overdo it either. What about this?” I hold up a soft, green, flowing dress with sunflowers all over it.

Siya raises an eyebrow and takes the dress from me, holding it up to my body. She hums softly as she looks at it, a smile spreading across her face. “You will look pretty.” She nods in approval.

“Hair is obviously your department.” I smile sheepishly. “I am going for light makeup,” I explain. She chuckles. “Oh no!” I yell. “I should take something for him, right?” My eyes widen. “I am meeting him for the first time; going empty-handed would look so wrong,” I whine. “He’s ill, so I can’t give him something harmful to his health.” I want to pull my hair out. God, why am I so tense?

“How about flowers then?” She cocks her eyebrow.

“I think I have become stupid.” I facepalm myself. “Yes, obviously, that’s perfect.” I rush to the bed and hug her. “You are a lifesaver.” She hugs me back.

I am one of those lucky people whom Siya is comfortable with. I smile. Every time

she hugs me, it feels like an achievement. I really love this woman. She is very important to me.

“I am sure you’ve saved my life more times than I have yours.” She chuckles and I slap her back softly, frowning.

???

DANIEL

“It’s going to be okay, I promise.” I squeeze Anya’s hand. Her shoulders are visibly stiff because of nervousness, and I want to comfort her, but I am afraid, too. I am not sure if things will go as planned. I adjust the bouquet of lavender that Anya insisted on buying. “Let’s go,” I say as the elevator pings open. The bouquet in my hand feels like an extra weight, a tangible reminder of my nerves. I take a deep breath and try to calm myself as we approach the apartment.

“I have lived here since I was eight.” I rub my nape and smile sheepishly. “So, if you find posters of Lebron James and some stupid motivational quotes, don’t make fun of me.” I glare at her playfully.

Anya smiles, a soft laugh escaping her. “I won’t. I won’t,” she promises, her hand squeezing mine.

“I am still a huge fan,” I say.

“Did you meet him then?” She raises an eyebrow.

“For a fraction of a second, yes.” I inhale deeply. “But I was too starstruck to say anything at all.” I chuckle.

“Daniel,” she whispers. I look at her. She smiles gently and raises on her toes, giving me a kiss on the cheek. I relish in the soft touch of her lips on my skin. “I am with you. I don’t know if I will be helpful, but—” I press my lips on hers and intertwine our hands.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way. I am glad you’re here with me.” I peck her nose. “You being with me is always helpful; remember that.” I smile against her lips. “I can breathe easily with you around.”

She opens her mouth to say something, but the door opens to reveal Nancy, her eyes widening in surprise as she eyes between me and Anya. Anya gasps and pulls her hand out of mine. I frown and look at her as Nancy chuckles.

“Hi, Nancy.” I smile widely. “It’s been a long time.” I fake a pout.

She hits my arm. “And whose fault is that?” She shakes her head and glares at me playfully. “Your father never complains, but you should at least visit him more, Danny.” She frowns. “Especially now. It’s only an hour drive from your university.” I feel a pang of guilt hit me all over again. It’s not like I did not want to visit him or didn’t have time to do so, but I was scared that seeing him so fragile would make me weak enough to give into all his demands.

“I am sorry,” I say apologetically. “How are you here?” I raise an eyebrow.

“I come to visit him every Saturday. I don’t want him to get lonely. Usually, I bring Mike with me, but I knew you would be visiting, so I told him to stay at home.” She smiles warmly.

“Thank you for doing that, Nancy.” I give her a side hug.

I can feel Anya’s eyes on me, and I steal a glance at her, noticing the way she’s standing a little behind me, seemingly unsure of what to do. I reach out and take her hand, pulling her closer to me.

“Anya, this is Nancy. She was my nanny.” I introduce them. “Nancy, this is Anya, my very pretty girlfriend.”

Anya's eyes widen but she composes herself quickly, offering Nancy a weak smile. I can't help but laugh at her reaction. She shoots me a glare that says, If Nancy weren't here, you'd be dead.

"She's lovely." Nancy smiles, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

"It's nice to meet you, ma'am." Anya smiles politely.

"Please, call me Nancy." She links her arm with Anya's. My girlfriend looks at me, taken aback, and I cock my head, giving her an indication that it will be alright.

"Do you remember, Danny?" Nancy turns her head to look at me, laughs, and looks back at Anya. "He used to call me Nanny. He never believed my name was Nancy." She chuckles. "Because I was his nanny, and he insisted on being called Danny so that our names rhymed."

I can feel the heat rising to my cheeks. "I was just a kid," I exclaim, crossing my arms defensively. Anya sniggers.

"I would love to know more about his childhood stories. Embarrassing ones, especially." She smiles smugly.

I walk faster, catching up to them. "Oh no, we are not doing that." I insert myself between them, and they laugh at me.

Nancy ignores me. "There was this one time when this boy set fire to the mattress because it was cold, and he wanted to make it warm." Anya's jaw drops and I groan.

"Come on." I pout at Nancy. "You don't need to tell her everything. You don't know her. She is going to tease me for life," I whine.

“That’s the plan, captain.” Anya smiles softly. I look into her brown eyes. So warm, they remind me of the golden hues of a sunset. My heart thumps faster in my chest.

“Go, show her around.” Nancy nudges me slightly. “Your father will be down in five.” She takes the bouquet from my hand.

I intertwine my fingers with Anya’s and head toward my room. Anya and I walk down the hallway, the comfortable weight of her hand in mine calming my nerves. Her gaze drifts over the walls, adorned with numerous framed photos. She stops. “Is that your mother?” she asks, pointing at one of my favorite photo of my mother and me.

Mom stands in the doorway in one of her floral dresses she loved, her bag in her hand. I’m perched on her back, arms wrapped tightly around her neck and my face split in a wide grin. She is smiling but I can see the annoyance on her face. She was getting late for work.

“Yes.” I smile. “I always wanted a piggyback ride, especially when she was working, hence the annoyed look.” I chuckle.

“You look adorable.” She grins, her fingers tracing the frame of one picture where my seven-year-old self is holding up a small trophy, a wide grin plastered on my face.

I chuckle, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pressing her closer. “Yeah, I was a cocky little shithead.”

“What makes you think that has changed?” She narrows her eyes playfully.

I scoff, my arm slipping down to her waist, drawing her closer. The scent of her lavender perfume fills my nostrils, and I inhale deeply.

“Who cares? You like me. That’s all that matters.” I grin, glancing sideways at her. My thumb brushes against the fabric of her dress, tracing small circles on the smooth material, relishing in the feel of her warmth beneath my touch. Anya laughs, a soft chuckle that escapes her lips as a faint blush creeps up her cheeks. She looks up at me, the corner of her mouth curved into a playful smile.

“Come on.” I pull her toward my room. I fling the door open and lead Anya inside. A familiar scent hits me—something like old books mixed with faint cologne. I pause for a second, taking it all in. The walls are still the same muted gray I painted them years ago, except for the one navy-blue wall that holds a massive poster of LeBron James.

The sunlight streaming through the wide window on the left casts a warm glow over the room, making everything look softer, smaller even. My trophies are still lined up on the shelf above the bed—gold and silver glints of memories staring back at me. The bed itself, pushed against the far wall, looks oddly neat. Too neat. Like Mom used to make it when she was alive.

I glance at the chair near the window and spot it—the fluffy basketball I used to carry around everywhere as a kid. The sight makes me chuckle under my breath.

“My mother gave it to me the day before she died.” I chuckle weakly. “I was upset with her because she did not hug me before leaving for work.” Her eyes soften as she accepts it. I watch her as she looks down at the toy, studying its features, her fingers tracing over the stitches of the basketball. She squeezes my hand. I squeeze it back and smile at her. “I am fine now.” I try to reassure her as a crease appears between her eyebrows. “She had coronary heart disease,” I inhale deeply, “she was in an accident and had a heart attack.” I explain.

“This was the last gift she gave you, Daniel.” She gasps. “Captain.” She smiles widely, and her eyes meet mine. “It’s as if you got her blessing. Call me

superstitious—” She chuckles. “---but she wanted you to become a basketball player because she knew you loved it, because she saw what I still see. You are the happiest when you are on the court, Daniel,” she says softly, grinning widely.

I can’t help but be overwhelmed by her words. She has no idea how much her words mean to me. She has no idea how much this is affecting me. “Really? You think so?” I whisper, uncertain of how to feel.

“Absolutely,” Anya replies, her eyes sparkling. “You are made for this, captain.” She moves closer to me and pecks my cheek .

My hands automatically find their way to her waist, pulling her flush against me. “You are a little wrong though,” I murmur, my gaze fixed on hers. “I am happiest when I am with you, Anya. You make my heart happy.” I lean my forehead against hers. “You are my home, Firecracker.” I press my lips to hers.

“You’re such a sap,” she murmurs against my lips, her fingers latching onto my t-shirt, pulling me closer. “Just promise me you’ll never stop being my basketball boy.”

I grin, my lips skimming across her jawline. “I promise.” I plant a kiss on her neck. A blush rises on her neck and she shivers. I smile against her neck, my hands reaching for the hem of her dress.

She pushes me away. “You are shameless.” I love seeing her natural blush, the way her chest heaves every time, the way I affect her.

“I think I have the right to be shameless with you.” I smirk. She shakes her head and twists her face playfully. My hands find their way to her hips again, tugging her against me, my body pressed against hers.

Her hands push me away slightly and she lets out a playful gasp. “You’re such a

tease,” she says, feigning annoyance but unable to hide it. Before I can say anything, there is a knock at the door.

“Your father’s waiting for you in the living room,” Nancy says from the other side.

“We are coming,” I yell back. I bring a hand to cup Anya’s cheek. “Are you nervous?” I ask gently, studying her reaction.

She meets my gaze, her eyes still sparkling, a gentle smile forming on her face. “With you, I believe I will be just fine.”

“Yes, it will be fine,” I say, more to myself than her, and kiss her forehead. “Let’s go.” I hold her hand as we walk back to the living room. I kiss the back of her palm. I have no idea why I am so nervous. I am not sure how everything is going to go. I’m uncertain about how my father will react, and I don’t know how Anya will feel either, but I know this is something I have to do. For my peace.

The soft carpet of the living room feels soft beneath my feet as we enter. My eyes wander to the couch where my father is sitting, his back facing us. He looks so weak. He seems lost in his thoughts, his gaze fixed on the fireplace.

“Hi Dad,” I say. I hope this goes well.

???

ANYA

I am the only one in this room, apparently, who is on edge. Daniel and his dad are chatting freely, and here I am, feeling so sweaty and tense. I am staring at the two. Daniel definitely got his height and voice from his dad, even though he has got the looks from his mother, and now that I have seen her pictures, I can easily say she was very pretty.

“I am just surprised how you got such a lovely girl to be your girlfriend.” His father laughs.

Daniel scoffs. “The same way you got mom.” He smirks. My eyes widen.

“Touché, son! I’ll give you that one.” He looks over at me with a smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“You flatter me, sir.” I smile sheepishly.

“Please, don’t be so formal.” His father frowns. “Just call me Frank.”

“Okay,” I whisper. “Frank.” I exhale. This feels so weird, but I guess it’s normal here. I will have to make a mental note to instruct Daniel to address my parents as sir and ma’am when I introduce them. They would be so shocked if he started calling them by their names. I chuckle. Daniel and Frank stare at me. Daniel cocks his eyebrow, looking amused. I shrug and smile softly.

Frank bursts out laughing, his eyes crinkling at the corners—just like Daniel’s, a sight

that always makes my heart flutter. He coughs. Nancy rushes to the jug kept on the dining table and brings a glass of water. Frank accepts it and drinks the water hurriedly.

“You should not drink water so fast.” I frown.

He looks at me, a soft smile appearing on his face. “I will keep that in mind.” I feel a warm glow at his acknowledgment, my tension easing a bit more. Daniel leans back in his chair, smiling at me.

“These two are always in a hurry.” Nancy shakes her head. “I have no idea why.”

They chuckle at the same time, and suddenly, the room drops dead silent. I glance at Daniel. He is already looking at me. His thumb grazes my palm as he sits up straight.

“Dad, I won the match,” he says quietly, looking at his lap, not making eye contact with his father.

I look at Frank, expecting him to be proud, but something different flashes across his face. A flicker of disappointment, his eyes widening in disbelief.

“You won?” Frank asks, his voice quieter, strained even. Daniel’s words hang in the air, the room heavy with palpable tension. Frank’s face hardens into a frown, his lips pressed into a tight line. “Won the match, huh?” Frank repeats, his voice low and tinged with concern. Daniel’s gaze remains focused on his lap. The silence stretches, thick and uncomfortable.

My stomach churns. I can’t help but feel a pang of anger beginning to rise within me. I clench my jaw. My breathing quickens, and I close my eyes to calm myself down. “Good for you,” Frank says slowly.

“What kind of father are you?” I raise an eyebrow, the words falling from my lips before I can stop them .

“Excuse me?” Frank looks at me, taken aback. Daniel finally raises his head. I can see his wide eyes from my peripheral vision, but I do not look at him. I am angry with him.

“I said, ‘What kind of father are you?’” I speak louder. “Do you know how hard your son worked for this?” I chuckle humorlessly. “You might not, but I know it. I have seen him being torn between wanting to win this match because this sport is his everything and wanting to lose it because you mean a lot to him, too!” I yell, “Because unlike you, he thinks about what you want. What will make you happy. Can’t he live his life the way he wants to?” I frown.

“Anya,” Nancy murmurs. My head snaps towards her, her eyes soften and she smiles weakly. My eyes widen in horror as I realize what I have done. I gasp, covering my mouth. A chill runs down my spine. I turn to look at Frank, expecting him to be furious, but his face is etched with surprise, not anger.

I know I have crossed a line, spoken out of turn, and my heart races in my chest. I slowly turn to look at Daniel, expecting disappointment or anger on his face, but instead, he looks back at me with a softness in his eyes and the faintest of smiles on his lips.

Without a word, he reaches for my hand, gently pulling me down to sit beside him. I can feel the weight of everyone’s gazes on me. I look down at my lap, feeling suddenly shy. I can feel the heat rushing to my face, a mixture of guilt and embarrassment. But I am not going to apologize because I believe what I said. Yes, my wording could have been better, but my thoughts still remain the same.

His thumb brushes over my knuckles. I want to move away; it feels too intimate, too

exposed, but he doesn't let me. Instead, he leans in, planting a gentle kiss to my forehead, grounding me in the moment. I feel a flush of warmth spread through me .

"It's okay," he says and smiles gently. My heart races with embarrassment, and I consider pulling away, but Daniel's grip tightens slightly, his gaze firm yet soft. He shakes his head, silently telling me not to pull back. "Just let it be," he says.

My breath hitches. I take a deep breath and nod slowly. I am still very much aware of the fact that his father is watching us intently.

"Dad," Daniel says softly, but before he can continue, the doorbell rings. I breathe in relief. As I get up from the couch, Nancy stands up, too.

"I will go." I smile politely. Thankfully, Daniel lets go of my hand. He probably understands that I need to vanish from this room for some time, especially after what I have done.

"I will accompany you," Nancy offers. I manage to nod.

We walk towards the door and when I realize they are out of our hearing range, I turn around to face Nancy. "I screwed up," I complain. "What will I do now?" I run my hands against my face.

She chuckles and holds my hand. "It's okay. You're fine." I shake my head furiously, but she continues, "I've been telling Frank the same thing since the day I found out about all this."

She sighs but smiles softly. "Still, I'm so happy Daniel has someone like you." Her expression shifts as her eyebrows furrow. "Don't get me wrong—I love his kindness. But sometimes, he puts others before himself and forgets that he's getting hurt."

She looks into my eyes, her voice firm yet gentle. “Don’t let people use him, okay?” Then, she beams at me tenderly.

She’s right: Daniel is like that. Being unkind makes him feel guilty. I can see it in the way he always bends over backward to please everyone else, even when it costs him his happiness. “I won’t let that happen,” I assure her, determination rising in my chest. “I want him to know that he deserves to be happy too.”

Nancy nods, her expression softening. “I am sure they will come up with a sane solution, because if they don’t—” she frowns. “---I am going to have to teach a lesson to these grown-up men.” She shakes her head and walks ahead. I snicker lightly, the tension in my chest eases a bit.

The bell rings once more and we hurry towards the door. Nancy opens it to find a man, probably in his fifties, standing before us. His demeanor is as stiff as a board, not a hint of a smile on his face. He is wearing a formal suit, which is immaculately pressed, with not a single crease or wrinkle in sight. And then, there’s that briefcase, held securely in his hand, as if it’s full of state secrets.

“Is Mr. Frank Grayson home?” the man asks, his voice steady and professional.

Nancy takes a deep breath before answering, “Yes, he is. May I ask who’s asking for him?”

He inhales sharply and reaches in his pocket. He takes out a business card and holds it out. “I am Killian Henderson, his lawyer.”

Nancy takes the card, her eyes scanning the name and title. She frowns slightly. I wonder what business Frank’s lawyer would have here, especially on weekend. It must be some serious matter to bring him all the way here like this. “Um, yes, he is here,” Nancy finally says, looking up from the card. “Please come in.” She steps to

the side, gesturing for Killian to come inside.

He nods in gratitude and steps into the house, adjusting his suit cuffs. “Thank you,” he says crisply, his eyes flickering over to me for a brief moment. And then he walks in, his footsteps muffled on the carpeted floor, moving further into the house. We follow behind. I want to ask Nancy why he is here, but I refrain. By the look of surprise on her face, I can tell she doesn’t know either.

I walk behind Nancy and Mr. Henderson, into the living room, where Frank and Daniel are still sitting. The latter is leaning forward in his chair, his eyes fixed on his father. The two aren’t talking when Frank looks up and sees Mr. Henderson walk into the room. His eyes widen. “Killian?” He stands up, frowning at him.

“Mr. Grayson,” Mr. Henderson replies bluntly. He extends a hand towards Frank, who looks surprised.

“I haven’t called you, Killian. Did you need something?” Frank asks.

“I called him,” Daniel says, standing up. He shakes Mr. Henderson’s hand. My eyebrows furrow. What is he trying to do?

“Why?” Frank mutters. Daniel takes a seat in his chair. Mr. Henderson sits across from him. I am too stunned to even move. I guess everyone feels the same because we are staring at Daniel, clueless as to what is going on. He looks at me and pats the couch. “Please sit,” he says and looks between Frank and Nancy. I walk over and sit beside him. His hand finds mine and he intertwines our fingers.

“Do you have the documents?” Daniel asks after everyone has taken their seats. Mr. Henderson nods. He looks at me, his green eyes shining. I can see a clarity in them, indicating that he knows what he is doing.

“Dad,” he says, slowly turning towards Frank. “You want me to take over your company, right?”

“Yes, I do,” Frank mutters half-heartedly, looking at Daniel intently.

Daniel nods. “I will.” His grasp on my hand tightens. “I will take it over.”

???

DANIEL

Anya gasps beside me. “Daniel,” she whispers as she releases her hand from my clasp, as if my words burn her skin, but I do not look at her because if I do, I am sure I will see disappointment, and I cannot handle that.

The only sound audible in the room is Mr. Henderson unzipping his briefcase. I look between Dad and Nancy. Nancy shakes her head lightly. Her brows furrow as her lips set in a thin line. Dad looks surprised, probably because he did not think I would agree so easily. I don’t know if what I am doing will hurt him more, but it’s the only way I could think of to keep both of us at peace.

“Here you go,” Mr. Henderson says, taking out the papers of transfer and handing them over to me.

“Dad.” I extend the papers to him. “You have to sign it, too.” Mr. Henderson passes a pen to Dad.

Dad eyes the papers in my hand and then he looks at me. It feels like an eternity before he speaks, his voice slightly firm. “Are you sure about this?”

I chuckle. “You’re asking me that now?” I shake my head. “I am agreeing to it in front of everyone, Dad. ”

Anya pulls on my sleeve, her grip tight, anger simmering in her voice. “Daniel, this isn’t a game. You’re throwing your future away!” I slowly turn toward her. There’s a fire in her eyes. She’s telling me, ‘You do this, and I am going to beat your ass.’ I

graze her hand, but she pulls it away immediately.

“No!” she exclaims. “I am not allowing you to do this.” Anger simmers in her voice. A smile plays on my lips. I feel so grateful at this moment that I have this beautiful woman in my life. It’s not that I need someone to fight my battles for me, but knowing she cares enough to stand up for me feels incredible. There are so many times I’ve felt lost, drowning in expectations and pressure, trying to be what everyone else wants me to be. But here she is, fiercely advocating for me, reminding me that my choices matter.

Her anger isn’t just about the decision at hand; it’s a reflection of her care. It tells me she sees me— really sees me—and wants what’s best for me, even when I can’t see it for myself.

“Do you trust me?” I ask softly.

She scoffs. “I do.” She narrows her eyes at me. “But not right now.”

I snigger. “Can you give me the benefit of the doubt, please?” She opens her mouth, probably to cuss at me, but I put a finger on her lips and lean in so that only she can hear me. “Have faith in me, Anya. Please. I need your support.” I sit up. “Sign it, Dad,” I say, looking at my dad.

“No,” Nancy exclaims. “Are you two idiots?” She frowns.

“Nancy, it will be fine. I promise.” I smile at her reassuringly. Her lips turn into a thin line, but she doesn’t say anything. I look down, smiling to myself. It just feels so great to have so many people who care for me so much.

“Daniel, I, uh—” Dad rubs his nape. “I want you to know that I just want to see you happy, son. Not only now, but in the long run.” He meets my eyes, his lips curling up

in a small yet sad smile. “Even when I am not there with you.”

I swallow hard, the weight of his words sinking in. “I know, Dad,” I reply, my voice trembling slightly. Mr. Henderson clears his throat, a subtle reminder of the moment pressing on us. Dad’s eyes flicker back to the papers. The pen hovering over the document, his hand shaking slightly as he signs.

Taking the pen from his hand, I hold his trembling hand firmly. I sign the document and give the papers to Mr. Henderson.

“I officially own the company, right?” I ask him. He nods assertively.

“Do you have the other paper ready? The one I talked to you about?” I ask. He nods again, handing the other set of documents to me.

I turn to face Dad. “I have an announcement to make,” I say and turn towards Anya. “I have thought a lot about it, and this is the best possible solution I could come up with.”

I take her hand in mine, my thumb gently running over the back of her palm. “You remember you told me that you wanted to gain experience; you wanted to learn how a business works.” Her eyes widen. “I want you to do it. I want you to do whatever you feel is right.” I inhale sharply and turn toward my father. “I want to convert the company into a partnership firm. I will be a sleeping partner though.”

There’s a palpable silence in the room as everyone processes what I have just proposed. I can see the look of surprise on Nancy’s face. Anya is looking at me like she can’t believe what I just said.

It’s a big step—a huge decision—but it’s one I am confident about. When it comes to her, I am always confident. I’ve taken multiple shots on the court. I’ve faced tough

defenders and missed a few opportunities, but she's my best shot, and not only from a business point of view. She is capable, a hard worker, determined, and a hustler, but for me, for my life, she is the color I was missing. She is everything I didn't know I needed in life. And because others make her feel invisible, I want her to know I see her. I see her talent, her efforts. I know she is worth a chance. I know she is worth all the chances.

I turn to face my dad. He looks stoic. His gaze locks on mine, his expression hard to read.

"You may not know it, Dad, and I do not expect you to understand me, but Anya is brilliant. She will be perfect." I smile. "Here you go," I say, handing her the papers.

"Daniel," she whispers, tilting her face. She smiles softly and shakes her head. "What made you think you could decide something like this for me?" She gets up swiftly. "I will be taking my leave." She bows to my dad and then smiles weakly at Nancy. I get up immediately, and the smile and the confidence I had in this plan, suddenly vanishes.

"Anya—" I begin. She looks back at me, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears, and my heart falls in the pit in my stomach. No. She walks away, toward the door. This is not what I expected, not what I wanted.

"Anya—" I yell, my voice desperate, but before I can move, Dad grabs my arm, his grip firm.

"Daniel," he mutters darkly, his tone cutting through my panic like a blade. I turn to face him, my chest heaving. "Why would you want to do that?" he asks sharply.

"What?" I snap, my patience unraveling.

“You have been dating for what? Six months? What if it doesn’t work out? What if you guys break up?” Dad’s voice is sharp, but his eyes betray a flicker of concern beneath the frustration. “I could easily transfer this business to your uncle. I did not, though, because I do not trust him enough to help you out if you ever need it. He’s my brother. I still could not do it. And you—”

“Dad,” I cut him off, my voice trembling with anger and desperation. “Just because you have trust issues doesn’t mean I should, too. I don’t care about what is going on between you and Uncle, but I will never be parting ways with her. No matter what.”

I close my eyes and take a shaky breath, trying to calm myself. “We will work through all obstacles, but we won’t leave each other.” I meet his gaze, my tone softening slightly. “And, Dad, my Anya isn’t selfish. She will never leave me alone.”

He sighs heavily, his shoulders slumping slightly. “Are you trying to run away from your responsibility? She did not know about it. What were you trying to do? Handing it over to her? You thought she would take it so easily. It isn’t a commodity, son. It’s a huge responsibility,” he says, each word landing like a hammer.

I freeze, the weight of his words sinking in. Is that what she thought? That I was trying to burden her? My chest tightens.

“I didn’t mean that at all,” I whisper, more to myself than him.

Dad studies me for a moment, his expression softening just slightly. “Did you take this decision because you truly believe in her, or are you just being selfish, Danny?”

“Selfish?” I whisper, the word hitting harder than I’d expected. My voice wavers as I try to find the right words.

“Have you thought about the pressure you’re putting on her?” he continues. “This

isn't a small gesture, son. It's her entire future. Did you ever consider how she might feel?"

The knot in my chest tightens further. My breath hitches as guilt washes over me.

"I have to go," I mutter abruptly, standing.

"Daniel—" Dad calls after me, but I shake my head, already heading for the door.

I have to see her. I have to fix this.

???

ANYA

I lie down on the bed, my purse on the ground. I close my eyes and breathe deeply to catch my breath. The cab broke down fifteen minutes away from my apartment, and I had to walk all the way back. Now, that is pretty normal for everyone else, but I am a homebody, a couch potato, and I absolutely hate walking, especially in heels, even if it is just block heels. If I think too much, I don't think I will ever get out of this dress.

The room is silent. The only faint sound is that of the fan. I peel off the dress, the fabric sliding down my body like a whisper. Once it's off, I toss it onto the chair and reach for my pajamas, but I pause to tie my hair up in a messy ponytail. With each twist of the elastic, I feel a bit of the day's frustration fade.

Finally, I grab Daniel's hoodie from the back of the chair. It's oversized and cozy, the familiar scent of him wrapping around me like a warm embrace. I pull it over my head and feel a rush of comfort. But even as I sink into the softness, my mind races back to earlier. His words echo in my head.

'I want you to do it.'

I was so in shock when he suggested it; I felt my world was spiraling. I could not believe him. I don't know whether it was the suddenness of the decision or if it was the decision itself, but I was upset when I could finally wrap my head around everything. I know his intentions must have been good—I believe in him—but the problem is that he didn't even realize that he should have discussed it with me. He cannot expect me to agree with whatever he decides. This is a huge thing, and his decision involves me, so I want him to know that he can't decide for me ever, at least

not without me. My thoughts matter, too, right?

But was I too harsh? Was walking away the right thing to do? I sit on the chair, hugging my knees. I sigh. That wasn't a mature thing to do. I should have come here with him and talked things out. He is right. I do tend to run away from issues. It's my first reaction.

He took over his father's business—for me. For me. And yet, somehow, he never thought it was necessary to actually talk to me about it. The audacity of it all makes my blood boil.

My chest heaves with frustration as I grip the fabric of my pajama. "Did he think I'd be...grateful?" I mutter under my breath. "That I'd just smile and accept this without a word?" I scoff.

The soft knock on the door breaks me away from my thoughts. I lift my head and look at the door.

"Anya?" Daniel asks. From the other side, his voice is low and tentative, and it sends a wave of warmth through me, despite the turmoil I'm feeling. I stand up from the chair and take a few steps towards the door, pausing briefly to collect myself. I open the door slowly, peering out at Daniel. He stands on the other side, a hint of concern in his eyes. He scans my form briefly, and I feel a flutter in my stomach at the sight of him.

"Can I come in?" he asks. It feels so weird coming out of his mouth. He never has to ask that and he knows it. It seems he thinks I am angry at him. I don't say anything and step back to make room for him to enter.

He enters the room, closing the door behind him. He looks tense, like he doesn't know where to put his hands. Silence envelops the room. I sit on my bed, observing

him. He rubs his nape and finally walks to me, sitting beside me. His thumb grazes over my hand cautiously. My heart skips a beat.

“I am sorry,” he says, after a while. I take a moment to absorb him—his side profile is striking. The strong line of his jaw is accentuated and I notice the way his brown hair falls just above his brow, slightly tousled as if he’s been running his hands through it in frustration.

He chuckles, but there’s a pain in his eyes. “Dad said I was being selfish.” He closes his eyes, inhaling deeply. “He said I was dumping my responsibility on you.” He smiles weakly. His gaze meets mine. “You probably think that way, too.” My eyes widen. “But the thought never crossed my mind, Anya,” he says. He leans down on his knees and looks up at me.

“I know,” I whisper, cupping his face. I kiss his forehead.

“You told me you wanted someone to give you an opportunity to learn how to run a business. I know you wanted that someone to be your father; you wanted your father to give you a chance, to believe in you.” He holds my hand and squeezes it. His eyebrows furrow. “I swear, Anya, I just wanted you to know that I do.” There’s a vulnerability in his gaze that makes my heart ache.

He kisses the back of my hand. “I think you are the most talented, dedicated person I have ever seen.” I almost say, look who’s talking, but I hold back. “I think if you choose to run this business, Firecracker, you will make it soar.” He smiles at me softly. “I want you to know that you’re worth the chance. You’re worth this shot, baby.” A lump forms in my throat.

“But, Anya,” His eyes sparkle. “I do not want you to think, even for a moment, that you will have to do this because my career is on line. It is not. I have a plan B, Anya.” I trace my thumb over the back of his hand, feeling the strength of his conviction. But

just as I am about to respond, he stops me. He strokes my face and forces me to meet his intense gaze. His eyes search mine, and I hold my breath. “You were my plan A. You will always be my plan A.” He chuckles, and so do I, unshed tears stinging my eyes.

“God, you’re too cheesy. It gives me chills.” I laugh softly.

“It’s totally up to you to decide whether you want this or not. I am sorry I didn’t realize this earlier. I am sorry I behaved like a typical man.” He rolls his eyes, and I laugh softly. “That’s not what you deserve, baby. I will work harder to become what you truly deserve.” His eyes soften. “No matter what your decision is, Anya—” He smiles gently at me. “---I want it to not affect us, okay? Even if you choose to go ahead and things don’t go as planned, or it becomes too much, I will not care.” He gets up and wraps his hands around my frame, kissing the top of my head. My eyes flutter closed and I inhale his scent. “All I care about is you being happy. All I care about is you, Firecracker.”

“That’s not right.” I sniffle. “You should care about yourself, too.”

He chuckles softly. “If you are happy, I will automatically be happy.” He pats my head and raises my head using his thumb. “This isn’t how I wanted to do this.” He chuckles. “I wanted to go all out, do a grand gesture probably, but—” He leans down and presses his lips against mine. “---I love you, Firecracker,” he mutters against my lips. “Trigger warning: cheesy line on its way.” He laughs. “A man could hold the weight of the world, but he could never carry the love I have for you.”

“Trigger warning accepted.” I giggle, my face flushing. “That was smooth. And cheesy, but mostly smooth.” I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. My heart races as his lips brush against mine, slow and tentative, as if he is savoring the moment. There’s no rush. I can feel the intensity of his emotions in every touch.

He takes his time, his hands gently caressing my face, sliding down to my neck and shoulders, making me shiver. His lips move from mine, trailing feather-light kisses along my jaw, leaving a path of fire in their wake. I can feel the rapid beating of his heart against my chest, mirroring the rhythm of my own. As his kisses move to my neck, my head tilts back, my fingers tangling in his hair, holding him closer.

“Let me take this off,” he says. I raise my arms immediately. I need to feel his skin burning in me. I need him touching me, inside me. I need him everywhere. He removes his hoodie from me and swiftly takes off his shirt as well. His hands slide down my arms, fingers grazing lightly over my skin. He reaches out and unclasps my bra.

“I am so in love with you, Anya. It makes my heart ache,” he says. I clench my thighs at his words. He bends and sucks my nipple between his teeth, causing a sharp hiss to escape me. I run my hands down his exposed torso to his jeans, fumbling with the button, as he continues nibbling on my breasts.

He takes off his jeans in urgency and pulls down my pajamas in one go, leaving me bare. I wrap my fingers around his bulging dick. One of his hands takes hold of my wrists and holds them above me. I love this.

He leans down, kissing me lightly, before his tongue slips between my lips. I can taste the donuts we ate earlier. I think donuts are going to be my favorite dessert now. No, scratch that: he’s my favorite dessert.

He leans down, sitting on his knees between my legs. My eyes widen. “Daniel.” I gasp. My eyes flutter closed, and my head falls back as he glides his tongue against my clit. I squirm beneath his touch, digging my fingernails into his shoulders. “I need you, captain,” I whine. “Condom in the bathroom cabinet. Hurry please,” I beg.

He returns with the rubber rolled over his dick and climbs on the bed. He hovers over

me, our eyes meeting as his tip grazes against my soaked pussy. “I love you, Firecracker.” He smiles and thrusts into me. I yelp at the suddenness, and he groans. “You’re everything to me.” He kisses my collarbone as he slides in and out of me. My hands wander down to his perfect ass; I squeeze it, and he smirks against my collarbone. “You naughty girl.” He bites me, and I moan.

He pumps into me slowly, filling me and I moan in approval. He grunts as he picks up speed. “I love you, baby,” he whispers in my ear. I bite his earlobe. “I never want to stop making love to you, Firecracker.” He increases the rhythm, and moments later, I pulsate around his cock. “Oh God, the way you squeeze me....” He growls, and his head falls back as we find our release together.

Daniel collapses on top of me. I close my eyes and nuzzle against his neck. His dick still inside me, I wrap my arms around him and kiss his ear softly. “I love you too, captain,” I whisper. He attempts to get up, but I pull him against me. “No.” My fingers scratch his back softly, and he sighs. “I love you with all my heart.”

He raises his head, his eyes soft. “I love you.” He pecks my nose.

I chuckle and say, “I will say something cheesy.” He grins and bites his bottom lip. “If I was an octopus—” He frowns. “---all three of my hearts would beat for you.” I press my lips together to control the laugh bubbling inside me. He wets his lips, a small smile playing on his lips. I swat his arm playfully. “Don’t laugh. It was way better than what you said.” I chuckle .

He bursts out laughing. Daniel’s laughter is infectious, and I can’t help but giggle along with him. “You can laugh all you want, but I have learned from the best.” I smirk.

“Oh yeah?” His eyes twinkle as he turns us around.

“Absolutely,” I say in a sultry tone. He smirks and grabs my ass tightly. I can feel his dick hardening again inside me. Hell yeah.

I roll my hips, and he grunts. “You’ll be the death of me.”

“Shh.” I put a finger on his mouth. “Now let me ride you like a good boy, okay?” I say against his lips, my nipples hardening at the contact of his toned chest.

“Yes, ma’am,” he grunts. I smile smugly. I’m going to make him feel every inch of me.

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DANIEL

I step out of the bathroom, the faint scent of my shampoo still hanging around me. I can feel the dampness of my hair clinging to my forehead and neck, and I swipe my hand through it, pushing it back with a casual flick.

I drape a towel around myself and walk out of the bathroom. My gaze lands on Anya's bag on the study table. I turn toward the bed to find Anya sprawled across it. A smile makes its way to my face. She's in her jeans, and her crop top has risen a little.

"Are you sleeping, baby?" I ask as I run my hand through my hair.

"No, I am training to die." Anya huffs. "Let me sleep, please," she whines, turning the other way. I chuckle and get into the bed. I pull her swiftly so her back is touching my chest.

"I love you," I whisper in her ear. She hums and turns around, her ass grazing my crotch. "Let's keep movements to a minimum, baby," I grunt. She chuckles and nuzzles her head against my chest. I wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her closer to me. I press a kiss to the top of her head and breathe in her scent .

"Had a rough day?" I ask. She hums.

"For starters, I am way behind on my syllabus with the finals being two weeks away, and Professor Keith assigned us a last-minute project I wasn't prepared for. I returned to my place, only to find out that I had no keys, and no one was home. It's like the

universe is laughing at me today.” She sighs as I scratch her scalp lightly. “I become this unbearable, insufferable, extremely rude, and grumpy monster during exam times. I hate it but can’t help it.” She looks up at me. “I am sorry you have to tolerate me.” She smiles weakly.

I frown, running my fingers through her hair. “Don’t say that,” I say, leaning down to place a kiss on her forehead. “I love tolerating you.”

She gasps. “You tolerate me?”

I chuckle. “I was joking, Firecracker.” I close in. “I don’t tolerate you. I adore you in your grumpy monster form.” I smile softly. “I will love you in all your forms, baby.” I kiss her nose.

“That’s better.” She glares playfully and kisses my chest. We lie there, silent for a moment. I pull the blanket over us as I begin to feel cold. “How was your day?” Anya asks.

“Good. After I attended that lecture with you, I went to practice. Coach will give us some days off for the exams next week.”

“Please, for the love of God, study in those days.” She scowls at me. “You have to pass. I was your tutor and if you fail, Daniel---” She narrows her eyes.

I chuckle, gently pinching her cheek between my fingers. “I will; I will.” I reassure her, amused by how strict she seems. I adjust my hold on her, pulling her even closer as she nuzzles into my chest, her hand gently tracing the muscles of my torso.

“Captain,” she whispers. I hum in response. “I am not sure about your proposal.” My back straightens, and I immediately know what she is talking about. “I know you told me you don’t care—which, by the way, is a rude thing to say.” She presses her cheek

against my chest. “Considering your father has built that company from scratch and I will never want to ruin his hard work,” she says. Her warm breath tickles me slightly. “I’m very grateful for this opportunity, and I will accept it in some capacity. But right now, I don’t think I’m ready to take on such a big responsibility, especially with college still going on.” She looks up at me. “But I would love to intern there, if possible.” She raises her eyebrow. “I mean, I think it would be helpful to understand the basics of your company before I can even think of taking it over,” she says hurriedly, “I will only accept it if I like it and if you still want me to do it after college. The internship, however, I will want to start next semester.”

I already had it in my head that she would not be very accepting of it because she doesn’t believe in herself and that stems from her urge to feel validated by her father, but I have complete faith in her talent. I have seen her. The passion I have for basketball is the same passion she has for business.

“I have already told you, baby, you have my support no matter what you decide,” I say, my voice firm. I give her a reassuring smile.

She looks up at me and I can see the relief in her eyes. She lets out a soft sigh, and she slowly relaxes in my arms.

“Thank you,” she whispers, and I can hear her voice crack slightly. “I never thought I would ever find a fool who would believe in me so blindly.” She chuckles.

I narrow my eyes at her. “For your information, I am the smart one here. I am investing in the future’s most powerful and influential woman. I can see it.” I wink.

She rolls her eyes, but a smile forms on her lips. “I am going to sleep now.” She yawns.

I flip the blanket and get up. She gasps at the sudden loss of warmth. “I am taking

you out for a candlelight dinner.” I smile.

“No,” she exclaims. “I can’t move anymore, captain, please,” she whines. I chuckle at her dramatic reaction, enjoying the way she clings to the blanket.

“Wait for me.” I walk to my closet. I drop my towel, turn back slightly, and wink at her. “You have my permission to enjoy the view.” A blush rises on her cheeks and she scoffs.

“I don’t need your permission. I can do whatever I want.” She pokes out her tongue.

“You’re right. You can. I am yours, after all.” I grin sheepishly and put on my boxers. “I am going to be back in a few minutes, okay?” I turn around to face her.

She pouts, reluctantly letting go of the blanket as she sits up on the bed. Her hair is tousled in a cute mess. “Where are you going?” she asks.

“Coming back.” I smile at her and close the door behind me.

I rush toward the door as the bell rings. As I open it, I’m greeted by the delivery person, holding a stack of takeout boxes and a small bag of candles. “Perfect timing,” I say, accepting the food with a grin. I thank him and close the door. I can’t wait to see her reaction. I make a quick stop in the kitchen to grab a lighter.

I walk back into the room, carrying the food, a bag, and a handful of small candles. Anya is still in bed, but she’s sitting now, scrolling on her phone. Her head snaps up as I enter the room.

Her eyes widen slightly at the sight. “What’s all this?” she asks, her brows furrowing.

“The candlelight dinner I was talking about.” I grin.

She gasps, sitting up. Her eyes light up. "I love you so much!" she exclaims.

I cock an eyebrow. "You love me because I ordered takeout?" I ask as I set the food on the study table.

She gets up from the bed and walks to me. "No, I love you because you went all out and got me food on a bad day. I would have slept hungry if it weren't for you." She smiles and rests her head on my shoulder.

"This is not what is known as going all out." I frown. "You said you wanted to eat a brownie." I open the container and hand it to her. "Here you go." She makes a puppy face, and I chuckle.

She takes the first bite and moans. "This is heavenly!" she cries out.

I wrap my arms around her waist. "You are heavenly, too." I smirk.

"I know." She smiles slyly. "But if you want this heaven, you will have to feed her."

I laugh, taking a piece of the brownie and bringing it up to her mouth. "Ah," I say. "Open wide, baby."

She sticks her tongue out at me but then opens her mouth. I feed her the brownie, watching her savor the taste. She closes her eyes and moans softly, clearly relishing the sweetness. I am so in love with this woman; I can't get over it.

"I love you, Firecracker." I kiss her.

"I love you, too," she says, her entire focus on the food. "So damn much. You are the best." She grins, looking at the brownie.

I laugh. I am one hell of a lucky bastard.

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DANIEL

Arnav has been staring at me since the moment I walked in. I can tell by the way his eyes are volleying between me and Anya that he isn't happy about us sitting so close. I have no clue what Siya and Sophia are talking about, but Anya laughs, so I give a polite smile so as not to come off as rude. I can't shake off his gaze.

Zeke comes and sits next to me. I turn to face him and find him smiling softly at Siya. I raise an eyebrow. So, Anya is right: there's something going on here. Anya told me she suspects Siya likes him, and the way she was talking about him, I got the feeling that Anya isn't a big fan of his. She is very protective of Siya. I do not know anything in detail, but I do know Siya has had a tough time, and it's visible in the way she behaves around strangers, so I get why Anya has this big sister instinct going on with her. They grew up together after all.

My eyes meet Zeke's. "Hey there." He smiles.

A soft smirk forms on my lips. "Hey," I reply casually.

"I have a question," I whisper to him. "Your friend over there." I cock an eyebrow towards Arnav. "He doesn't like me, right?"

"Oh, like isn't the right word." He smirks. "He wants to punch you, throw you at the wall, yes." He chuckles as my eyes widen. What the fuck have I done? "But you make Anya smile, so he won't do any of that." He leans in slightly. "Don't tell him I told you this, but he's scared of her. Your girlfriend is quite scary." I smile. That is partly true. It's better to remain on her good side.

I chuckle at Zeke's words, my eyes flickering back to Arnav. "I know that," I remark, taking in the intense stare he's still giving me while he mixes the lemonade noisily. "I'll be back," I whisper in Anya's ear. She nods and gives me a small smile.

I push myself from the table and walk towards the kitchenette, away from the group. Arnav eyes me up and down as I stop in front of him. "Hi." I greet him. He doesn't say anything in return, just nods firmly. Arnav's gaze is intense, and I can't help but feel a bit uneasy. "So, I guess we need to talk," I say, keeping my tone casual.

"About what?" he asks, his voice low and guarded. I sigh, cross my arms over my chest, and lean against the counter, studying him as he continues to mix the lemonade.

"Anya means the world to me," I say. I am not sure what I am trying to do here.

Arnav's jaw tightens, a flicker of emotion crossing his face at my words. He stops stirring the lemonade and sets the spoon aside. He crosses his arms over his chest. "What's your point?" he replies, his voice cold.

"My point is..." I straighten up. "I will always cherish her and take care of her." I smile softly. "You don't have to worry about her."

Arnav narrows his eyes, scrutinizing me, as if weighing my words. He takes a step closer, eliminating the distance between us, his gaze unwavering. "I will take your word for now, but remember," he says, his tone chilly. "---if she sheds one tear because of you—" He glares at me. "---I will give you multiple reasons to worry about yourself."

I smile. "Yes, sir." He loves her. I can see that. He pours the lemonade into a jar.

He picks it up and walks toward the living room where everyone is seated.

“Remember, this stays between us.” I nod curtly. As Arnav walks away, I take a moment to collect myself. He was more intense than I had anticipated.

I return to the living room. Anya spots me and pats the seat next to her. She wanted to have a movie night. I was so excited and then I found out she deliberately left the ‘with everyone’ part out; not that I am complaining, but it would have been so much better with only the two of us and a lot less clothing involved.

“We are watching Jurassic Park . Sophia’s pick. She loves dinosaurs,” Anya exclaims.

I settle down next to her, wrapping my arms around her. “Did you know this is my third time watching it?” She looks up at me.

“I have watched it once, but I don’t remember it now. It was way back. I watched it with my mom.” She nods in understanding.

“You know, if we were in Jurassic Park, I’d be the one protecting you from all the dangers because you’re worth the risk.” She smiles smugly.

“I see my bug has bitten you.” I chuckle. “You’ve become cheesy, too, but thanks a lot, baby.” I kiss her forehead. She giggles.

She picks up the bowl of popcorn. I take it from her and keep it on my lap. She picks up a handful, offering me some. I feel Anya relax in my arms, her body warm against mine. She leans her head on my shoulder, her hair tickling my neck.

“Let’s watch the movie,” she mutters. “If I sleep halfway, don’t tell anyone.” She glares at me playfully. “And wake me up when the movie’s over. This sexy dinosaur wants to ride you.” She winks.

I groan. “You love torturing me, don’t you?”

“Absolutely. It’s my favorite thing to do.” She puts her hand near my crotch. “The way your neck flushes and you breathe deeply, trying to control your desire, the way your eyes turn dark green. I love it.” She grins devilishly, knowing exactly what she’s doing. Her hand is still dangerously close to my crotch, a subtle tease that has me shifting in my seat, desperately trying to maintain my composure.

“You’re going to be the death of me.” I growl under my breath, my grip around her tightening possessively. “You can’t just drop a comment like that and then expect me to remain calm.” I lean my head against hers, my breath warm against her ear. “Keep this up and I’ll carry you to the room in front of everyone, you little tease.”

“You won’t be able to,” she says confidently.

“Are you challenging me, baby?” I cock an eyebrow. She hums and laughs evilly. The movie begins and I can hardly pay attention to it. My eyes shift from the screen to Anya. The proximity of her hand to my aching cock is almost maddening. I need to get out of here, and I need her urgently. I get up abruptly. She eyes me up and down, smirking. There has to be a way to get her into her bedroom.

“Baby, can you help me find a pain killer,” I say, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Siya turns towards me. “Are you okay?”

I laugh weakly. “Yeah, just body ache. No worries.” I scratch my head. Anya smirks.

“You should go rest then,” Siya suggests. I nod, walking toward Anya’s bedroom .

“You should go check on him,” I hear Sophia say. These girls are lifesavers. I don’t know how I will ever be able to pay them back for this favor that they don’t even

know I owe to them.

I stand by her study table on the left side of the door, and as soon as she enters the room, I close the door, hugging her from behind, making sure my dick rubs her ass so that she knows what she has done to me. “I told you; I win, firecracker.”

She sniggers and turns back, grazing my dick with her ass. I grunt silently. “You need a painkiller, huh?” She raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah. And that painkiller is you,” I say, slamming my lips on hers. She lets out a soft gasp, melting into my arms, her body pressing against mine. “You are the one who put me in pain. You are the one who will cure it.” I growl.

“Gladly, sir,” she says, taking off her t-shirt immediately and unhooks her bra. My breath hitches at the sight her breasts. I waste no time, pressing her back gently but firmly against the wall, trapping her between my body and the cool surface, nibbling on her nipples. A pleased hum escapes her mouth as she arches her back.

I run my hands down her sides, savoring the soft feel of her skin. “You consume every bit of me, baby,” I murmur between kisses, my voice heavy with need. She fumbles with my jeans. I help her unbutton them, and I drop my boxers and pull her shorts down. I grab her hips and lift her slightly, her legs instinctively wrapping around my waist. Her breath quickens as I press her firmly against the wall, the weight of her body molding perfectly against mine.

Her nails dig into my shoulders as I lower my mouth to her collarbone, kissing and nibbling my way down. “Daniel...” She breathes, her voice a mix of desperation and desire. I can’t resist the way her body responds to my touch, how her hips grind against me in need.

I guide her down onto me, groaning at the sheer intensity of the moment. She gasps,

her eyes rolling back as I thrust into her, a low, guttural sound escaping my lips. The pleasure is intense, almost overwhelming. “That’s right, baby. Take me all in.” I pant between clenched teeth. I look at her. She’s lost in ecstasy. “I need to feel all of you,” I mutter, my voice hoarse.

“Fuck yes, Daniel.” She moans needily. I press my forehead against hers, our breaths mingling, heavy and ragged. The room fills with the soft sounds of our bodies colliding. Anya’s quiet moans fuel the fire burning inside me, her nails scraping down my back, leaving a trail of heat in their wake.

“Harder,” she whispers breathlessly, her voice laced with both need and desperation. I don’t hesitate. I tighten my grip on her hips and thrust deeper, harder, making her cry out in pleasure. The way her body responds, clenching around me, drives me wild.

“You like that, don’t you?” I growl into her ear, my teeth grazing the sensitive skin of her neck. She nods frantically, biting her lip as she tries to stifle her moans, but I don’t want her to hold back.

“Let me hear you, baby,” I murmur, my voice rough with desire. “Let everyone know who’s making you feel this good.”

Anya’s grip tightens on my shoulders as her body trembles, teetering on the edge of release. Her breath hitches and I know she’s close. My pace quickens, my hips slapping against hers with a relentless rhythm. The sound of her pleasure fills the room and it’s all I need to push me over the edge.

With one last deep thrust, I feel her body tense, her back arching as she screams my name. The sight of her lost in pleasure, completely undone beneath me, makes me bury my face in her neck, groaning as I pull out immediately. I wrap her hand around my pulsating cock. She strokes my dick and squeezes it gently.

“Anya, I am so close.” She keeps stroking my cock as I kiss her intensely. I moan in her mouth as I find my climax. I pant, resting my forehead against hers. She pecks my nose. “You never fail to blow my mind.” She chuckles.

I smile against her lips. “And you never fail to drive me crazy, Firecracker,” I mutter, my hands still holding her hips as I catch my breath. “Every single time.” I lean in to press a gentle kiss to her forehead.

“Let’s get dressed and go out,” I suggest.

She clings to me. “I don’t think there’s a need for that. We have already missed a lot of the movie,” she says, “Take me to bed, captain.” She smiles smugly.

“Gladly, baby.” I chuckle.

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Two months later

ANYA

The industrial fan whirs above me as I inspect the water filtration system's maintenance logs. Eight weeks into my internship at PureTech Solutions, I'm already fascinated by every detail of the operation. Most people wouldn't expect to find me here, covered in safety gear and learning about reverse osmosis systems, and neither would I, because I hate and fear science, but look at me enjoying it for the first time in my life. Not that I have to use it that much. I just watch people do their work, but it is still interesting.

"Hey, Mike," I call out to our maintenance supervisor. "I noticed the pressure readings from last week were slightly off on unit three. Is that normal?"

Mike looks up from his clipboard, his weathered face breaking into an approving smile. "Good catch, Anya. That's exactly the kind of detail we need to monitor. Want to learn how to adjust it?"

I nod eagerly, following him to the unit. Every piece of knowledge matters—from the basic operational procedures to the complex technical specifications .

We stop in front of unit three and Mike begins to explain the pressure settings. I listen intently, my eyes darting to the gauges and dials while jotting down notes on a small pad. "Adjusting the pressure within the unit can affect its overall efficiency," he explains. "You need to find the right balance to ensure optimal performance."

Frank always says the devil is in the details and he is right. I have become very close to him. After all the drama, I went back with Daniel so we could both apologize for being rude to him and let him know my decision. Apparently, he was very impressed that I just didn't dive into this world, and I stepped in to learn the ground-level work before setting foot in the owner's cabin. So, he promised to teach me everything he could, and I am so grateful for it. He truly is a great human, and I can see why Daniel is so kind and caring. Speaking of Daniel, I check my watch. Two more hours until he picks me up.

This has all turned out to be in my favor honestly. Yesterday, I got a call from my father asking if I could help him with custom relations, and I was initially very surprised that I was his first choice. He called me before Arnav, but then I decided to decline. I did give him suggestions, but I told him I did not have enough time, and that's just the truth. Also because, for the first time, I felt that I was doing okay, and as much as his validation will make me happy, I have to find my path, learn from my own mistakes, and make him and myself proud by my efforts, and I can do that without him. His guidance is welcome, but I will no longer be fighting for his attention. I will earn it now. And right now, I am busy doing exactly that, so I denied it.

The afternoon flies by as I help Mike with routine maintenance checks and update our digital logging system. I hear the familiar sound of Daniel's car pulling up outside. I rush to the window to spot him getting out of his car. He catches my eye and I wave at him, grinning widely. He waves back, smiling at me, and signals for me to come down. He is still in his training gear from the 76ers's camp. Even after all this time, seeing him in those colors makes my heart skip a beat. I am so proud of him.

"Hey, superstar!" I say, beaming up at him. He hands me the coffee mug. I take a sip and sigh in relief.

"Hey there, my favorite intern!" He leans down to pull me into a tight embrace, and I

breathe in his familiar scent—something that feels like home.

“Today was all about maintenance protocols and quality control. How was training camp?” I ask.

“Intense,” he says, buckling my seat belt. I kiss his cheek, and he grins at me. “Coach has us running new plays. The veterans are helping me adjust to the NBA pace. It’s different from college ball, that’s for sure.”

“That sounds tough, but I know you’ll rise to the occasion,” I say, placing a hand on his thigh reassuringly. “I have no doubt you’ll be a star player in no time.”

He grins, his eyes sparkling with determination. “I appreciate the vote of confidence, Firecracker.” Just as I am invested in my journey at PureTech, I’m invested in his basketball career, too because I want us to grow together. I want us to succeed together.

“Before I forget, your mother called me,” he says, his gaze shifting to me momentarily. “She was asking for my address. I gave it to her, but do you know why that is?” he asks, his hand squeezing my thigh.

I roll my eyes. “I told her not to.” I huff. “She is sending snacks for us, so she said she will send it for you, too.” I fold my arms. “I told her I will share it with you and you don’t like spicy stuff, so she is sending everything sweet she can find and make.”

He chuckles. “That’s sweet. I will call her tonight and thank her.” He smiles. A small smile makes its way to my face. I introduced him to my mother last month, and since then, I often find my mother and my boyfriend gossiping about me. It’s cute, but it’s annoying when they gang up on me, like one of each isn’t enough for me.

“So, what’s on the agenda tonight?” he asks, shifting into gear.

“As of now, I will be studying for a while. But after, can we watch this new thriller movie out on Netflix?”

He chuckles. “You know I’m always up for a movie night, especially if it means getting to cuddle with you.” He smirks.

“Huh.” I scoff. “We are not having sex,” I say firmly.

“Okay, we will see.” He smiles smugly. I know he is going to win, but you can’t blame me. I mean, have you seen him? He’s the most drop-dead gorgeous man I know. I am desperate, but that doesn’t mean I have to show it to him. Not that he would care.

The car comes to a stop outside my apartment. “Captain,” I whisper. He looks at me. “I just want you to know that I met you unexpectedly, and I was very annoyed by you, but I would not be as happy as I am today if I hadn’t met you. So, it’s the best thing to ever happen to me. You really brought my life on track.” I smile gently, meeting his eyes.

“I love you Firecracker,” he says softly. “Even clueless, I would still be madly in love with you, Anya.” His eyes sparkle. “I am irrevocably yours.”

I feel my cheeks flush. “How do you always know exactly what to say?”

“Because I know you.” He winks. “Plus, it’s easy when it’s true.”

“I love you, captain.” I peck his cheek.

“I love you, too, Firecracker,” he says, pulling me into a kiss.

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1 YEAR LATER

ANYA

It is my first day as the owner of PureTech—well, I am part owner, but still. Daniel has given me the rights to do whatever I feel will be beneficial for the business. I did not like it, so I told him I would like for him to listen to all my plans before I move on with them. Two brains are better than one, right?

Walking into the meeting room, I take a seat and adjust my laptop on the polished wooden table, making sure everything is in order. The sunlight streams through the large windows, illuminating the space with a warm glow. I take a moment to breathe, reminding myself that I belong here. And it's just Daniel I will be presenting to, but I fear I will not be able to maintain professionalism. I roll my eyes. As if he will. I did invite Frank, but he canceled at the last moment. When I asked for a reason, he fumbled and said he had to visit the doctor.

I know he's much better now; the doctors say his condition has miraculously improved. Daniel cried in my arms that night, overwhelmed with gratitude. It wasn't the first time I had seen him cry, but I felt so useless. Seeing him cry, I started crying, too, and in the end, he was the one who had to console me. I laugh softly, rolling the curtains down and switch on the lights.

I settle into the chair, feeling the smooth leather beneath me. It has wheels, and I can't resist giving it a gentle spin. I pull myself closer to the table. He's late. I open my laptop to go over the slides of my presentation once more. I frown. He has been too busy these days. I mean, I understand the pressure and the life of a celebrity that

comes with his career, but it has never affected our time together in the past six months. It's only this week that he is always late, and he is secretive about stuff. It's just not like him.

There's a knock on the door, pulling me out of my thoughts. I take a deep breath. "Come in," I exclaim. The door opens, and Daniel steps in. My breath hitches. He's wearing a sharp navy suit that fits him perfectly, the tailored lines accentuating his athletic build. His hair is tousled as if he's been running his fingers through it repeatedly, and a shadow of stubble adorns his jaw. "You leave me breathless every time you are in a suit," I whisper.

He chuckles lightly, but there's anxiety in his eyes and stiffness in his shoulders. I will have to talk about it with him later. "I take it back!" I exclaim, "This is a highly professional environment, and you are just a stakeholder." I shake my head to bring myself to my senses.

"Yes, it is." He smirks, stepping forward and pecking my lips. My eyes widen.

"Do you ever even listen to me?" I ask. My eyebrows furrow.

"Yes, always. That's why I have been blessed with ears: so that I can hear your voice," he says, and I huff.

"Why are you late?" I cross my arms against my chest. His eyes roam around my cleavage. Pervert .

"I was trying to find the perfect suit," he says, rubbing his nape. "You had invited me to our very first business meeting, after all. "

"Well, thank you for the effort." I give him a flying kiss, which he pretends to catch. "Can we begin?" I ask.

“Yes,” he says, taking a seat next to me. I turn the laptop so that he can see the screen too.

“Alright,” I begin. “I’ve been thinking about some significant changes that could really boost our growth.” Daniel shakes his leg continuously. I rest my hand on his leg.

“Okay, so first of all, I feel we should expand our market.” I switch to the next slide. I glance at him, gauging his reaction. He seems tense. There is something weighing on him definitely. I cannot keep going on like this. I shut the laptop. “Daniel?” He looks at me. “What’re you thinking about?” I ask carefully.

“I think I have a better idea,” he says slowly.

“Oh.” I frown. “Why are you tense about that? That’s good actually. Let’s talk about your idea first then.” I smile at him reassuringly.

He opens his mouth to say something, but the lights in the room flicker and go out. I shriek and instinctively lean toward Daniel, my heart racing. He gets up from his chair, breaking the silence of the room. I open my mouth to stop him, but then the projector whirs to life, casting a bright image onto the screen. My eyes widen as I see the title: A Business Plan for Life.

I turn to Daniel, my mouth agape. He’s standing next to the presentation, an amused yet nervous smile on his face. “What is this?” I whisper, my eyes already welling up. Is this what I think it is?!

Daniel takes a deep breath, clearly nervous yet determined. “Just keep watching,” he says with a small smile.

I look at the screen again.

The first slide reads: The Imperfect Partnership.

He shoots me a grin. “Our lives entwined when I spilled that coffee on you, and then, very kindly, fate decided to put us together for a project.” He sniggers. “That was so fucking unexpected, but I am happy that it happened. I did not put much effort on that assignment, but I promise to in our relationship. You can happily and violently remind me if I ever forget it.” I chuckle and sniff as tears well up in my eyes. “Life has given me what my soul needs, so there’s no way I am giving up on us. Ever.”

He skips to the next slide which reads: The First Investment.

“Now, I would like to say that I was the one who made the first move because you were too proud to admit your feelings to me.” He scoffs. “But I am glad you let me be your boyfriend because I cannot breathe when I imagine my life without you. I have never been this happy, Firecracker.” His eyes twinkle.

My heart swells. “Daniel,” I whisper, feeling overwhelmed.

He continues through the slides. “The next slide,” he says, “is about the risks.”

The words flash on the screen. “Life isn’t always easy. We will both go through ups and downs, and there will always be a risk with anything we do.” He skips to the next slide, which reads: The Rewards.

He smiles at me. “But I want you to know that we’ll always have each other. The bonus for you is that you will have a man who can brew your coffee order; you won’t have to go to a cafe.” He winks at me. I giggle, shaking my head.

He switches to the next slide. “Will you invest in a future together, Ms. Anya Mehra, and make me the happiest man alive?” he asks, his eyes shining as he bends down on one knee. “Will you give me a promotion?”

My mind is racing a million miles a minute. I sit on my knees in front of him to match his eye level although that's impossible because he's too tall. My tears won't stop. "Will you let me be your husband?" He pulls out a small velvet box, opening it to reveal a stunning ring. "You are my partner in every sense of the word. You've made me a better person and I want to spend the rest of my life making you just as happy. Will you marry me?"

"You chose the most hilarious way to propose." I chuckle. He's so cute. He wipes my tears using his thumb and I nod vigorously. "Yes. A million times yes, captain." I throw my arms around him. Daniel rises from the floor, pulling me up along with him. He wraps me in a secure yet tender embrace, his body heat surrounding me. He buries his face in my hair, his arms around my waist, pulling me so close that our hearts are aligned. He tightens his hold as I bury my face in his chest, the tears making a wet patch on his suit, but he doesn't seem to care, and neither do I. "I love you," he whispers in my ear, his voice thick with emotion.

"I love you, too," I say and kiss him.

There is no person I would rather spend my life with, no other man I would want to build my family with. He walked into my life unexpectedly, annoyed the fuck out of me, and stole my heart at the same time. He helped me grow as a person, and now, I want to grow old with this beautiful man. I look into his green sparkling eyes, and I know for sure, with Daniel by my side, life is always going to be the best, just like he is.

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