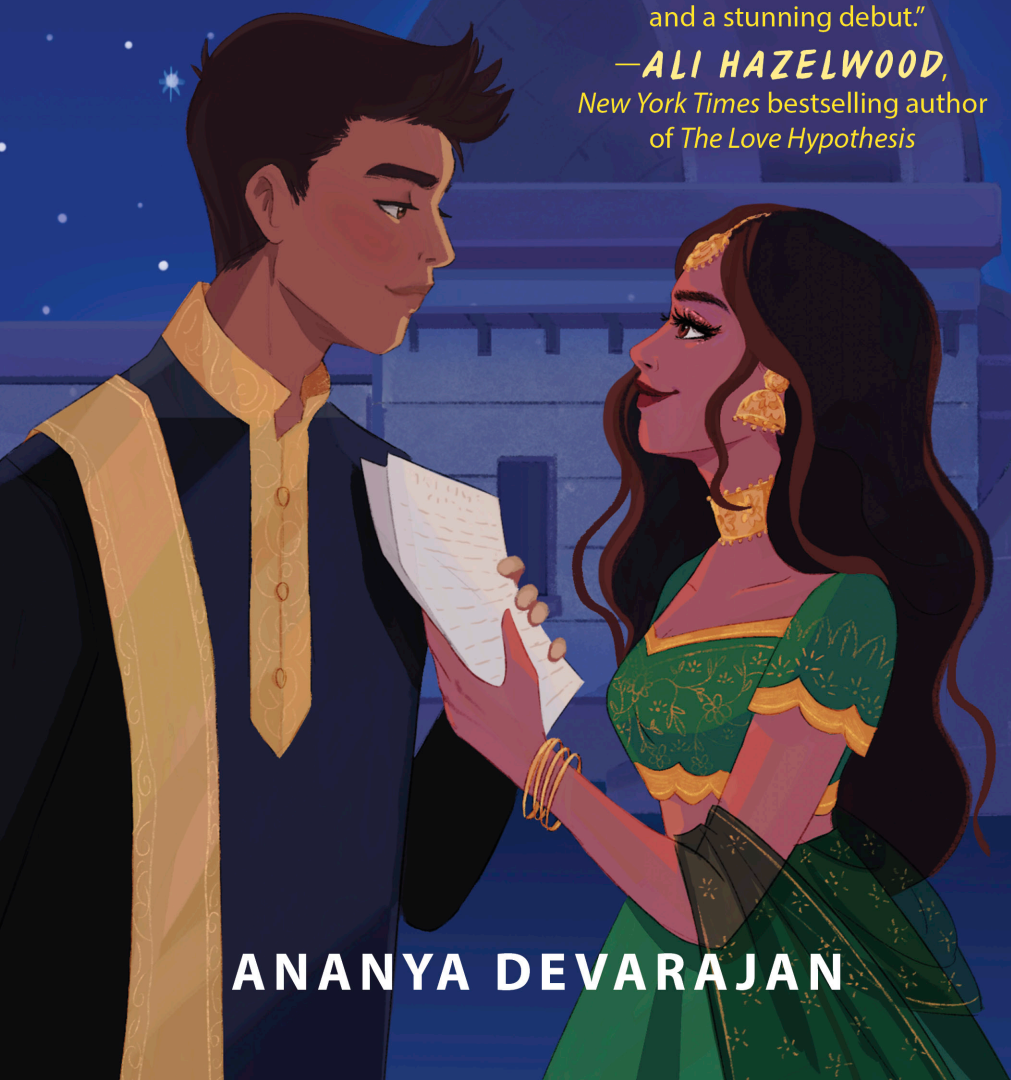


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ANANYA DEVARAJAN

Kismet CONNECTION

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Kismat Connection

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to Appa, Amma, and Anushka
my words would not exist without you

CHAPTER ONE

arjun

“The stars are absolutely in your favor.”

A smile twisted Arjun Mehta’s lips, his cosmic black eyes twinkling at the middle-aged woman sitting with her legs crossed in front of him. A fresh set of scratches blossomed on his skin, thanks to the mangled mat they sat on. Every year he’d have his astrological chart read, which meant pulling out the neon orange rug beforehand. He called it his good-luck charm.

“You’re sure, Auntie Iyer?” Arjun asked, leaning forward with interest.

Auntie Iyer wasn’t actually his aunt, but rather a next-door neighbor turned family friend. Like most Indian children, Arjun was raised to refer to the elders in his community by either Auntie or Uncle. The title was often used as a sign of

respect, but Arjun saw it differently. Auntie Iyer was as much a part of his life as his own mother, and referring to her as an Aunt made their connection feel more concrete, even though it didn't stem from a pure blood tie.

"Have I ever been wrong?" When Arjun clicked his tongue in defeat, Auntie Iyer laughed. "Your senior year is characterized by one word: balance. Your hard work will be rewarded in the fields of education, athletics, and love, though there will be multiple obstacles in your path."

Arjun's heart slammed exactly twice through his rib cage. Once in fear. Once in hope.

"Love?" he sputtered. "We both know I'm not the most eligible bachelor in town."

That was a lie.

A total of fifteen thousand people lived in their town. His graduating class consisted of 122 seniors and Arjun knew from experience that a majority of his classmates did not find him attractive. That was, until his junior year of high school, when his culture became a trend.

In elementary school, Auntie Iyer would pack him lemon rice for lunch whenever his parents forgot, and his classmates would bully him half to death about its neon yellow color. Now they asked if he could make them "Golden Milk," a newly trademarked Starbucks drink born from the same yellow turmeric that stained his rice. The girls that once scorned his bronzed skin, calling it a tan that had somehow lost its way, now attached themselves to his arm. They marveled at his curly black hair as if his features had transformed from uncomfortably alien to fetishizably exotic. His town had ex-

panded its palate to include him last year, but that didn't mean he wanted to appease their picky taste buds.

"You know better than anyone that the stars never lie," Auntie Iyer said as if she could read his mind. When he didn't respond, she placed a hand on his cheek. "Are you okay, beta?"

Arjun was suddenly overwhelmed with heartburn so severe it scorched his intestines to a crisp. He wondered if his body was trying to distract him from what the stars could mean for his relationship with a certain someone...

Who just so happened to be Auntie Iyer's beloved daughter.

He knew better than anyone that Madhuri Iyer couldn't give two shits about astrology, or about anything Indian, for that matter. Himself included. Even if his prophecy indicated romance and even if that involved her, Madhuri wouldn't let it happen. As much as he hoped otherwise, Arjun knew that if it was Madhuri versus destiny, she'd win. Hands down.

"I'm alright," he responded after a beat of hesitation. "Do you know any more information? Anything concrete I can keep an eye out for?"

Auntie Iyer scanned his charts from the past seventeen years, breathing life into the stacks of paper littering the floor. He was overwhelmed by the memories flying out of the pages, their edges frayed and made brittle by time. He saw the first time he scored a goal as the varsity lacrosse team captain, his school cheering his name louder than any sound he'd ever heard before. The first time his teammates lifted him on their shoulders when they won the state championships. The first time Madhuri lunged at him to celebrate, clinging from his shoulders like she was meant to be wrapped in his arms. He

recalled the way her smile sparkled like an undiscovered galaxy, as if she were seeing him in a way she never had before.

Wishful thinking.

“You’re going to be given an opportunity by a woman who shields you from reason, and sometimes even basic common sense.” Auntie Iyer’s lips widened into a toothy grin. “She will have rejected you on multiple occasions and will continue to do so until she faces the truth of her feelings for you. And when that happens, it is up to you to decide if she is too late or right on time.”

“Great,” Arjun muttered. “The stars are sticking me with a girl who doesn’t even *want* to love me. You’re sure you’re not interpreting this wrong?”

Auntie Iyer lifted a neatly threaded eyebrow, peering at him through her rounded spectacles. Her expression twisted into a deadly combination of hurt and annoyance. It was only a matter of time before she threw her chappal at him.

“I haven’t read a chart wrong in my forty-four years of life. You should know better than to ask that,” she chastised. “Have you suddenly turned into Madhuri? Do you need me to beg you to have faith in something other than cold logic?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. You should know better than to think that of me.” He cut his eyes at her, throwing his hands up in defense in case a slipper went flying at his head. Arjun was being disrespectful, but he couldn’t help it. He didn’t want a prophecy to be the reason he fell in love, especially not when it had Madhuri’s name written all over it.

To say he and Madhuri had been best friends for years would be an understatement. When Arjun thought of his life as he knew it, he saw Madhuri. She was a constant, a single

thread of gold bridging his past and his future, and he had long concluded that a world without her would be thoroughly mundane.

The truth was Arjun had fallen hopelessly in love with Madhuri by the ripe age of thirteen. And now, four years later, he was still trailing after her with hearts in his eyes, too afraid to speak up out of fear that he might lose the best friend he'd ever known. He'd nearly lost her once before—in their freshman year of high school after a particularly upsetting fight. In the aftermath, he'd resolved to never risk their stability again, not even for his own feelings.

Arjun was forced out of his thoughts when Auntie's chappal connected with his face. "Ow!" he yelled, scrunching his nose in anguish. "What was that for?"

"Disrespect." Auntie Iyer huffed. "I'll ask you one more time. Are you okay?"

He wanted to answer her, he really did. Madhuri, however, had other plans.

"Amma!" A shriek echoed through the living room. Madhuri's nimble fingers ran through her waist-length hair as she glared at the two of them, unquenchable flames blazing away in her pupils. "Are you seriously reading his chart? No one in the twenty-first century even believes in astrology other than you!"

Auntie Iyer rolled her eyes. "Spare us the theatrics. You have your chart read every year, but you're too embarrassed by your own culture to own it. Arjun, at the very least, is proud to be here with me. You could learn a thing or two from him."

"Mom!" Madhuri hissed, this time in English. Arjun couldn't help but chuckle at how dramatic she was. As soon

as the sound left his lips, Madhuri spun on her heel to face him. “And what exactly are you laughing at?”

“Nothing,” Arjun said. “Maybe you should sit down with us. You’ve never missed our annual reading before, so why start now?”

Before Madhuri could explode into another temper tantrum, Arjun reached for her hand. Their palms connected and she fell to the floor soon after, leaning her head onto his shoulder. “Fine. Let’s get this over with.”

Arjun smiled to himself. He knew her way too well. Her outbursts never lasted for longer than a few minutes, and they ended even quicker when he was there beside her. They were better as a pair, even if it would only ever be platonic.

Auntie Iyer flipped through her papers again and pulled out a bulky leather-bound book with a bow and arrow embossed on the cover in gold. Sagittarius in every way, Madhuri was her family’s miracle child—astrologically speaking, that was. Every single planet of hers had fallen into the embrace of the Archer.

“Do you want the honest truth?” Auntie Iyer sighed.

“Obviously,” Madhuri snapped.

Her mother averted her eyes back to the pages. “Your stars are conflicted. You, simply put, are going to crash and burn in your senior year. That’s how the teens say it now, correct?”

Arjun raised an eyebrow at the information. Madhuri never failed. She was the kind of person who’d win every game, ace every test, beat every bully—whether she tried or not. He’d always envied that about her, not that he’d ever admit it.

“Crash and burn? Is that really all you have to say about my chart?”

“Fine, I’ll move on to more tangible developments.” Auntie

Iyer held up two air quotes when she said the word *tangible*. “You’re arrogant. You’re used to success and that comfort will result in your downfall. You’ll face a future where you can’t quite reach first place the way you used to.”

Madhuri scoffed and squeezed Arjun’s hand twice. A cry for help. They’d come up with the signal in fourth grade when Arjun was being bullied for spending all his free time with a girl.

This was the first time Madhuri had ever used it.

“You’re so full of it, Amma. I’m not going to fail. I never do.”

“That’s the exact arrogance I’m talking about.”

Madhuri ignored the snark. “What do you even mean by *downfall*? That’s awfully vague. Am I going to crash and burn in academics? In social activities? In romance?”

Arjun choked on air when he heard the last part. Neither of the women noticed him.

“You’re not going to fail, but you won’t succeed as easily as you’re used to.” Auntie Iyer removed a sheet of paper from the book and pointed to the different angles between each planet, their orbits drawn by hand. “All of your alignments are disastrously weak, which means your internal compass leading you toward growth is damaged. Expect mediocre grades, misunderstood emotions, and failed relationships.”

“I don’t believe you. This unevidenced magic of yours doesn’t fool anyone but Arjun, and he’s hopeless.”

“It’s Vedic astrology, not unevidenced magic. If you’re going to insult the craft, you might as well use the proper terminology.” Auntie Iyer didn’t even bother to comment on her daughter’s tone, sporting a poker face instead. “Besides, you and I both know that these readings are not meant to be

a foolproof prophecy, but rather an opportunity to reflect on the elements highlighted in your chart. At the end of the day, your destiny is entirely in your control.”

Arjun cut in, his gaze lasered solely on Madhuri. “You think I’m hopeless? Believing in something larger than yourself is not hopeless. Bonding yourself to your culture is not hopeless, but it’s not like you would understand. You’re too busy whitewashing yourself to please the awful people in our town.”

Madhuri gasped, yanking her hand out of Arjun’s. “Take that back.”

“No. Someone needed to put you in your place.”

“You think you’re so high and mighty because you act more Indian than me,” Madhuri whispered, her once-playful voice now gaining an edge. “I watch the same Bollywood movies as you. I have my chart read annually. I eat Indian food three times a day, every day. I just don’t parade through the streets, waving my ethnicity around like a flag, like you do.”

Before Arjun could bite back with an equally heated retort, Auntie Iyer scrambled to her feet and clapped her hands. “My ears are bleeding. Will you two, for the love of Krishna, shut up?”

“But you started this!” Arjun exclaimed. “What about our horoscopes? Our senior year?”

“My world doesn’t revolve around you two, sadly.” Auntie Iyer was smiling, so he had a feeling she wasn’t that sad about it at all. She snapped the book shut, a burst of dust leaving the pages on impact. “You will figure it out. You always do.”

And then, much to Arjun’s dismay, Auntie Iyer winked at him.

CHAPTER TWO

madhuri

Later that night at the dinner table, Madhuri curled her legs up to her chest as she flipped through a stack of graded school-work collected over the last semester. Her eyes landed on every A+ scrawled across the top of her exams and essays, often followed by a glowing message from her teachers. And yet, thanks to the unlucky prophecy looming over her head, academic validation no longer brought her any peace.

Madhuri sighed and tossed the assignments to the side, her once-steaming dosa forgotten on the plate in front of her. She watched as a gust of wind streamed through the open kitchen window, scattering her dirty crumbs across the table. Even the sound of her mother's laugh as her father cracked another corny joke didn't comfort her the way it normally would.

She was much too preoccupied with her history of success, boldly stamped on her transcript despite her mother's prediction otherwise. Madhuri couldn't imagine a future where she lost her ability to succeed simply because of an unfounded, overdramatic, scientifically impossible prophecy. The thought alone was enough to send a spark of pain through her already twisted stomach.

"Why is she sulking now?" Josie Gregorec, Madhuri's best friend of three years, asked aloud with a teasing lilt to her voice. Her mouth was stuffed with crispy dosa, the deep red of the crushed peppers staining her lips like an organic lipstick. "Did you put a curse or something in her chart this year, Auntie Iyer?"

Madhuri felt her shoulders tense at the mention of a curse, and she resisted the urge to lecture Josie for her curiosity. "I'm right here, you know. You can ask me to my face." Madhuri sent her mother a glare from across the dinner table. "Speaking of my mother, I hope she knows I'm not going to Arjun's game tonight."

It was Madhuri's father who chimed in. "What's with the change of heart? We always support him at his games as a family." When Josie flashed him a wounded look, he offered her a smile. "You're a part of the family, too, Josie, just like Arjun is."

"Arjun will survive without me. He's a big boy." Madhuri gritted her teeth, bleeding sarcasm from the enamel of her incisors. When her dad sighed, obviously disappointed by her reaction, she urged herself to soften. "I'm sorry. That was mean of me to say, but my overall point still stands. I'm just not in the mood to watch a game tonight."

"Oh, you can come up with a better excuse than that." Her father lifted an eyebrow at her. "There's something you're not telling us."

Before she could respond, Madhuri's mother cleared her throat from her seat at the head of the table. Madhuri turned to her in anticipation of a snarky response, but she focused on the empty spot beside her mother instead. It typically belonged to Madhuri's little sister, Raina, who'd ditched Arjun's game for Bharatanatyam class. Madhuri hadn't gone to a dance lesson since her freshman year, not since the harsh spotlight and quiet audiences scared her away. She envied Raina's courage to continue even as her older sister jumped ship.

"Oh, you're so in for it now," Josie mumbled under her breath as she expertly tore into her third dosa with one hand, using the other to squeeze Madhuri's shoulder in silent support.

"Didn't you know, Dev? Madhuri's convinced that her astrological reading is wrong, and she's throwing a pity party with the sheer purpose of spiting us. Like always, she's taking her emotions out on not only us, but Arjun, too." Her mother was speaking directly to her father, but that didn't stop her from shooting Madhuri a passive-aggressive smile. She was obviously irritated, but she wouldn't fight Madhuri over it. In their family, banter was how they practiced conflict resolution. "What are you so scared of? Failure? Disappointment?"

"All of the above. I don't like being told that I'm going to fail at everything and that there's nothing I can do to stop it because it's written in the stars, whatever that even means. I believe in my free will, but apparently that has no place in my future," she retorted.

"That's not true. You always have the ability to shift your fate, but running away from it does nothing." Her mother's eyes slowly softened. "And I hope you realize that, no mat-

ter what happens, you will always have us. Your family will never leave your side.”

“You’re not hearing me, Amma.” Madhuri caught Josie’s sympathetic gaze. Their friendship was already so comfortable that Josie was listening in on their most vulnerable discussions. Madhuri had never been more grateful for her presence. “I hate the idea that some unprovoked cosmic force can ruin all of my hard work. I don’t want to fail, and I don’t think I deserve to, either, not after everything I’ve done to succeed. I have an SAT score in the ninety-seventh percentile, a 4.0 GPA in the IB program, and attractive extracurriculars to boot. You can’t expect me to believe that the Universe is suddenly going to destroy all of that for no reason.”

“The Universe won’t destroy it. You will, whether you realize it in the moment or not.” Her mother swallowed a large bite of dosa before speaking again. “Are you sure this isn’t about what the reading predicted about the relationships in your life?”

Her father choked on his chai, the steam from the tea fogging up his reading glasses. “Relationships? You’re only seventeen. You don’t need a relationship with anyone beyond your family, Arjun, and Josie.”

Madhuri ignored her well-meaning father. “I’m not going to lie, that’s part of the issue. It doesn’t make sense that my prophecy thinks I’m going to be the victim of misunderstood emotions and failed relationships—not only is that claim incredibly vague, but it’s also too easy to refute. For example, let’s say I were to facilitate a positive experience with love despite the odds stacked against me. If that new relationship

were to succeed, wouldn't that inherently prove my prophecy wrong?"

"First of all, it's not a prophecy. That implies perfect accuracy," her mother corrected. When her father snorted, her mother elbowed him in the gut.

"You know what I mean, Amma."

"You can't create a perfect relationship whenever you feel like it," her mother continued. "If that was possible, I wouldn't have fallen in love with your father when I was still establishing my clinic in India."

Her father shook his head. "You chose to follow me to the United States, Kamala. It's not like I asked you to leave the clinic behind when we fell in love."

Madhuri tried to imagine how it would feel to be touched by a love that wasn't platonic. She wasn't anything like her mother, who had the courage to leave her thriving medical clinic in India to start a family with her father in the United States, thousands of miles away from her own. Madhuri didn't inherit the selfless gene, nor did she have faith in any power beyond her own immediate control.

"All I'm trying to say is that this prophecy is way too unbelievable. My life isn't going to fall apart simply because the planets have decided it will, and nothing you say will make me believe otherwise," Madhuri bit out, her eyes firmly trained on her floppy dosa.

Her mother sighed. "You're thinking about the family curse, aren't you?"

"What does *that* have to do with this conversation?"

"Madhuri, my love, you're throwing a tantrum about how desperately you want to control your own destiny. You may be

using the reading as the scapegoat in your argument this time, but I'm your mother, and I know that you always end up circling back to our curse somehow."

Madhuri noticed Josie lean forward, suddenly intrigued. Her stormy blue eyes, much like the waves of the ocean during a high tide, widened as she glanced between Madhuri and her parents. "Your family has curses? You seriously never tell me anything, Madhuri."

As Josie's complaint registered in her ears, Madhuri felt a combination of guilt and anxiety creep into her throat. Was her prophecy stumbling into effect already?

Josie cocked her head to the side when Madhuri didn't respond with an equally petty retort. "You know I'm kidding, right?" Madhuri shook herself out of her spiraling thoughts to offer Josie an affirmative, yet tired, smile. Her best friend nodded as if she'd understood her perfectly and turned back to Madhuri's parents. "Tell me more about this curse."

"It's not a curse, per se," her father said, lifting the mug back to his lips. "It's more of a coincidence that every single woman in your mother's bloodline has married their first romantic partner. We don't have any divorces, either, so you could call us one-hit wonders."

Josie's mouth opened, and thankfully, there wasn't more food there. "No way."

Madhuri groaned, burying her face into her arms before turning back to Josie. "We're not joking. And it's very much a curse, for your information. I want to be able to date whomever I want without worrying that I'll fall in love with them forever. It's way too much pressure."

Her mother scrunched up her nose, making it clear where

Madhuri got it from. “I can’t believe you *want* to experience all the heartbreak and tears associated with traditional dating.”

“Yeah, I would kill to never have to worry about dating!” Josie said. “If this is a genetic inheritance thing, then I’m screwed. My mom and dad had to suffer through quite a few shitty first dates before they found each other and lived happily ever after.” Her face turned red when she registered the swear she’d used, but when Madhuri’s parents laughed good-naturedly, she settled back down.

Madhuri opened her mouth to argue, but the incensed words she’d prepared suddenly disintegrated on her tongue. An uneasy emotion washed over her, the one that always accompanied the thought of her family curse and the happily-ever-after it promised. She felt as if she were being held hostage by the Universe, doomed to compromise her future and herself for the sake of love. Her latest prophecy only worsened that feeling.

Thankfully, the conversation at the dinner table drifted from curses and prophecies to Josie’s passion project, which was finally coming to fruition in their senior year—a student-run talent show highlighting all the art and culture Southern California had to offer. Madhuri, who’d already spent most of her summer vacation fundraising for the show with her best friend, utilized the temporary shift in topic as an opportunity to plan her next steps.

Madhuri’s family history haunted her, stories of true love passing from mother to daughter for centuries. She couldn’t help but think about her mother’s clinic in India, a dream that was once alive deep within her heart. A dream that was

now nothing more than a distant memory, slowly replaced by the kind smile of her father.

Madhuri was overwhelmed with a burning desire to prove her family, particularly her mother, wrong about everything. Madhuri would never let herself be bound to a prophecy with no scientific backing, nor would she become the target of a curse like all the women who came before her. She had to find a way to kill both of those pesky birds with one stone, but it didn't seem like her family would be willing to listen to her with an open mind. She'd have to *show* them exactly how mistaken they were, exactly how much power she held in her own life.

All she needed to do was target a specific area of her prophecy for refutation—her academics, her personal growth, or her relationships. Compared to the former two, manipulating a successful relationship in the face of her prophecy's negative predictions shouldn't be that difficult. She'd pick some willing sucker to date her until June, when she'd inevitably break up with him before college. She'd take part in an experimental relationship that would only end when *she* wanted it to, and with one perfect shot, her family curse and her prophecy would cease to exist.

The only thing she needed was a boy who would help her destroy her own destiny. A boy she was guaranteed to never fall in love with.

She knew just the one.

CHAPTER THREE

arjun

A distinct shiver raced through Arjun's fingertips when he wielded his lacrosse stick. The feeling careened through his veins like an oxygenated blood vessel. He cradled the ball in its net, breaking into a sprint toward the goal on the opposite end of the field. The shiver transformed into a burst of wind, encouraging the adrenaline pumping in his eardrums to push for more. More endurance, more agility, more power.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Madhuri's family and Josie standing in the front row of the packed school bleachers. Josie screamed at the top of her lungs, jumping up and down like a cheerleader, and Auntie and Uncle Iyer held each other close, their gaze narrowed on the aggressive players he was

blazing through. They were worried, as always, for his health. One concussion had already sent them into a spiral of anxiety. They couldn't handle another scare.

Madhuri, on the other hand, was nowhere to be found.

Arjun tried to shake off the disappointment that had suddenly replaced his energy. He couldn't expect her to attend his games like some sort of Trophy Girlfriend, even if it was the very first match of their senior year. She'd never be that girl, and he'd never ask that of her.

When Arjun tore his eyes away from the bleachers, ready to deliver a perfectly aimed shot, the opposing team's captain checked him. Hard. The lights hanging over the lacrosse field transformed into white spots, exploding in Arjun's vision with increasing intensity. He felt his heartbeat thudding in a shy corner of his brain until the pain ricocheted off his skull and into the rest of his body.

He crashed into the grass headfirst. His fingers raced to his forehead, checking for signs of another concussion. A thin stream of blood leaked from his hairline, and he groaned out loud, looking up toward the bleachers again. Auntie Iyer was clinging to the rails, screaming his name. He was sure that from their vantage point, it looked like he was knocked out. He'd have to tease her about her dramatics the next time he saw her.

The referee blew his whistle for a time-out as Coach Hegde grabbed him by the arms, hoisting him onto the brightly decorated bench beside them. One of the posters taped to the bench had his name painted in blue and gold ink, their school colors. He smiled when he caught sight of the famil-

iar signature at the bottom left corner. A curvy, barely recognizable *MI*.

Even when she wasn't there for him, she was.

His coach shone a bright light in his eyes, and when nothing out of the ordinary seemed to show, he let out an incredibly long sigh of relief. With a pat on the back, his coach ran back to the field, leaving the school nurse to inform Arjun that he was out for the rest of the game and that he could either sit and watch or go home.

The smile was wiped clean off Arjun's face. He'd never been kicked out of a game before. Did his coach see his moment of distraction, the weakness that gave their opponents an advantage? If so, he was screwed. He'd be running laps around the field until their next game.

"I'll watch," Arjun muttered, clenching his fists as the nurse cleaned his wound with alcohol. When he turned to the bleachers to send Auntie Iyer a comforting thumbs-up, the nurse pulled his head back with a click of her tongue. His grin turned into a grimace that he was sure Auntie Iyer's hawk eyes caught. Great. He was truly in for it when they got home.

"How are you doing there, Arjun?" A familiar voice sang from behind him. He whirled around to find the source, only to have the nurse screech in dismay. With a huff, she pressed an ice pack to his temple and left the bench. Madhuri occupied the seat next to him, a soft smile twisting her lips. "You don't look too good."

"I appreciate the kind words." Arjun withheld the urge to roll his eyes at her.

"Fine, I deserve that." Madhuri placed her palm against his cheek, eyeing the bandage on the side of his head. She

leaned in so close that Arjun could smell the Orbit gum on her breath, the brand she used to cover up the remains of her garlic-infused meals. “I hope you know that I was watching your game the whole time. I just wasn’t in the bleachers with the rest of the family.”

She could read his mind, just like her mother.

“You should’ve been. I couldn’t find you in the stands and I got distracted,” he said, pointing to his injury like the outcome was obvious. Arjun couldn’t see it at the moment, but from the way the cut stung, he knew that the blood caked into his skin would soon be replaced by a frighteningly large purple scab. “And then, this happened.”

She sighed, her fingernail gently grazing the edge of his jaw. “I’m so sorry.”

Another shiver danced through his spine, waltzing with the layers of cartilage and marrow etched into his bones. “You don’t have to be sorry. It’s not your fault. But where were you if you weren’t in the bleachers?”

“Right here.” Madhuri patted the bench they were sitting on. “I wanted to hold up your poster when you scored and scream at the top of my lungs, so you knew I’d be here for you even when we fight. Even if it’s over something as ridiculous as astrology.”

A small chuckle left his lips, and he bumped his shoulder with Madhuri’s. “I was wondering why you were kissing my ass all of a sudden.”

“I was not! I’m being a good friend.”

“That’s rare.” He stuck his tongue out at her like he would when they were kids.

“I’ll let that insult slide, for now. I have more pressing matters to discuss with you.”

“Sounds ominous. Tell me more.”

Madhuri didn’t roll her eyes at his comment the way he’d expected her to. Instead, she toyed with the gold pendant on her necklace, a nervous tic Arjun had picked up on years ago.

“Right.” She nodded, turning to face him clearly. “I want to date you, Arjun Mehta.”

She couldn’t possibly be serious. There was no way she wanted to date him, not in a million years, and not even if they were the last two people on the planet after an apocalypse.

Her words, not his.

Before Arjun could respond, the bleachers behind him erupted into cheers and the school band played their fanfare louder than before. He turned back to the field, and he saw that, despite his slipup, his team had managed to win the match by one point, which would have been fantastic if the sudden excitement hadn’t distracted him from what really mattered. Madhuri, the girl who’d owned his heart ever since she stole a jalebi from him when they were six years old, wanted to date him.

Arjun didn’t know what to say, so he blurted out the first thought that came to mind.

“Are you fucking with me right now?”

“How romantic,” Madhuri deadpanned. “No, Arjun, I’m not—” she motioned two air quotes with her fingertips “—fucking with you.”

Arjun nearly sank into the bench when he saw her face, serious and downright unamused. She obviously meant business,

whereas he'd suddenly become incapable of having a normal conversation with his childhood best friend.

"Let me start over," he began, and in the process of drawing out his words long enough to figure out what to say next, he'd left an opening for his teammates to sprint toward the bench, pulling Madhuri and Arjun into a group hug turned mosh pit. The nurse grabbed Arjun by the jersey before he was thrown in, dropping him back on the bench with another huff.

When Madhuri entered the circle, she threw her head back, laughing, and for a split second, Arjun forgot all the pent-up anticipation and anxiety that came with the thought of Madhuri dating him at last. The wind caught her hair, swinging the highlighted strands of black and blond in the faces of his teammates. No more than a minute passed before Madhuri turned around and found Arjun sitting on the bench by himself, and her smile instantly faded. She forced her way out of the circle and sat back down beside him, squeezing his hand in hers.

He looked back to the bleachers that were now empty of people and littered with confetti. Auntie and Uncle Iyer were nowhere to be found and neither was Josie. He tugged on Madhuri's hand, which was still encased in his own, to get her attention. "Your family is going to come here soon, so I'll get straight to the point. Why do you want to date me? And why now?"

"Well, it's not really dating in the traditional sense. I mean, we'd have a set of hypotheses detailing the expectations of both parties involved, control variables that would scientifically guarantee our success, and we'd have an end date. June fourteenth, the day after our graduation," she said, both of

her hands in Arjun's now. She leaned forward, so close that he was worried he'd smell the minty-fresh gum again, and he wasn't quite sure what he would do if that happened.

"This sounds more like an experiment than a relationship, Madhuri."

"An experiment is exactly what I have in mind."

Her words hit him like a bullet. Of course, there was always a catch.

That was also the exact moment his heart skipped multiple excited beats in a row because, oh, God, his reading was already coming true. He scanned the area around them for Auntie Iyer and saw her marching toward him, face set in a stern expression. Behind her was Uncle Iyer and Josie, smaller in size when compared to Auntie Iyer's booming presence.

He didn't have much more time to think, and Madhuri was giving him her trademark puppy-dog eyes. He felt himself melting away, tumbling into the hopes he'd hidden away in his soul for so long. Maybe that was why Arjun agreed to her terms. Maybe that was why he decided that, no matter what, Madhuri would always be perfectly on time when it came to their relationship—even if it was purely experimental.

"Yes. Let's do it."