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# MURDER BARTER



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Klaus:

I had a tiring, long day and the only activity that I could pass with distinction was sleeping. My usual, midnight "work-under-pressure" coffee was not of great importance that day as I effortlessly stayed up, staring at the ceiling.

I did nothing productive but recall my high school days in India. I found it impossible to accept that the only girl I ever cared for in school is gone. She's no longer here, lost to the world forever.

2014:

"Wow, did you really think that the haircut was a good idea? I guess some people just don't know when to stop." I didn't know how to respond. I was caught captive of her beauty already. "What a lucky day, " I thought, "to have such an amazing encounter on the first day!"

"Hi, I'm Klaus, from Germany. I'm the new exchange student for this session. "

She gave me a once-over, twice, her beautiful eyes framed by flawless eye makeup that only made her stare more piercing. She didn't utter a word but her poised demeanor spoke volumes. She was Claudia (or Claudia the mean girl).

She was quite different from the usual mean girls we have forever watched on the virtual screen. Claudia ruled without sidekicks, without a clique of mean girls to back her up. She was a queen in her own right—an unstoppable force, a one-woman army who thrived on the fear and resentment of her peers. The school's disdain only fueled her; she relished the power she held, reveling in her role as the ultimate mean girl. Claudia wasn't just about power; she was also driven by ambition, working tirelessly to achieve academic excellence. You could often find her in the library, buried in books, or in the music room, perfecting her vocal skills. If you're wondering how I know so much, it's because I was hopelessly in love with her. I took pleasure in knowing every detail of her life, no matter how small. I also knew that Claudia wasn't a mean girl 24/7. Beneath her tough exterior, she had a softer side—a girl who would slip into the chapel to cry when no one was watching and visit Mr. Matthews, the counselor, to share the pain she kept hidden from the world.

Sometimes, it would shatter me to accept the fact that she would no longer be in school after graduating and that I have yet to toil as a high schooler after my 9th grade. Yeah, you got me right. I was madly in love with a senior girl!

But as life would have it, I was attending her funeral in 6 months.

I assumed it was Rishi and despised him. Claudia never showed any interest in me,

ever.

But I always wondered what spell he'd cast on her that she secretly started liking him. She'd do little things to impress him and attend every football match of his although she knew nothing of the sport-world. Ughh I wish I could divert that attention towards me. I spotted Rishi in the boy's loo during the recess. There was none besides the two of us. I aggressively held him by his collar and just asked, "WHY?" Confused, he asked back, " Why what? "

"And please let me go. my neck's hurting. I do not wish to fight you back as you're a junior." That's right, Rishi Chopra, captain of the football team was a final year student at school. He was tall, muscular to an extent and had firm legs. Now that I saw him so closely, I understood why any girl could fall for him. His eyes and lips were so eloquent themselves.

I didn't want to get smashed by the coolest senior and retired from holding him that way. I then clearly asked, "Why did you kill her? I mean, Claudia? " And his only reply was, "why would I?" with a sharp stare.

Later, with the research that I carried out, I found out that rishi was actually hospitalized due to a typical match injury on the day Claudia died. I didn't bother to learn what injury though, because it didn't matter to me.

Vishnu:

Hey, I'm Vishnu and I'll take it from here (because by the time kiddo-Klaus could figure out anything and be the hero of the story, he had to return to Germany to address some family commitments).

I am the dorm relief. I actually work for AMC, Madurai as a hostel administrator, but I'm here at Kodi School on duty whenever I'm summoned.

Whenever I arrived in Kodaikanal, I noticed Claudia's restlessness. She was always the last to enter the dorm. From the restricted top balcony, I watched often, as she emerged from Mr. Matthews' office, met with Raj Anna in secret, and then finally stepped into the hostel.

Being a mean girl came with its own backstory. Claudia's childhood was marred by turmoil, shaped by toxic parents who subjected her to verbal abuse. They eventually sent her to boarding school, viewing her as a burden. To shield herself from further emotional harm and to reclaim a sense of control, she adopted a mean girl persona, ruling over others with a formidable attitude.

She would talk about her trauma and burdens to Mr. Matthews, whose ex-wife, Miss Jane, was the beloved English teacher admired by all. Mr. Matthews and Miss Jane Rego had divorced after he discovered that she was having a physical relationship with Raj Anna, the bus driver. Despite his ongoing love for his ex-wife, Mr. Matthews

harbored a deep resentment toward Raj Anna, whom he blamed entirely for the turmoil that led to their divorce. His anger was fueled by the belief that Raj Anna was the sole cause of the chaos that shattered his marriage. Claudia, confiding in Mr. Matthews, told him her secrets starting from details of her abusive parents to having a crush on Rishi. Mr. Matthews was no less than her human journal. He knew everything about her. Little did poor Claudia ever guess that he would use her trust against her.

I was Matthews' classmate back when we were high school students. I knew how manipulative he could be. He had a history of not being a secret keeper. Back in school, he was known for spreading speculations in the air, half of which were never real. Years after, I was shocked to learn that Matthews had become a counselor here. I feared that the students might not be safe by seeking solace in him. On the other hand, I assumed that with physical growth, he may also have transitioned into a better and a trust-worthy man. But some people never change, you know, as the saying goes, "Old habits die hard." Miss Jane, a good friend of mine, once asked me if I could help out a student, who was a resident of the dorm I was in charge of, by earning his trust and convincing him not to visit Matthews anymore. I never asked her the reason because the both of us knew by now the different shades of Matthews. But then she trusted me more than Matthews and my heart fluttered. I felt as if it were the season of spring. Ahemm Ahemm! Now that isn't important. Let's not get sidetracked. Just like some students whom Jane and I had together saved, I wanted to save Claudia from the hands of Matthews too. I kept waiting for the right moment as she was too busy, too popular and too impulsive at the same time. But by the time I could await the right time, her time on earth had expired.

Now if you remember, Klaus's "love research" on Claudia says that she could often be spotted in the chapel. Christie was another dorm resident who was a frequent chapel visitor. At times when Claudia felt alone, Christie would accompany her to the chapel. Similarly, on days when Claudia lost track of time in the chapel, she would remind her to get back to the dorm. It was very rare to see Claudia getting comfortable with anybody. She probably would have studied Christie thoroughly and found that she's harmless. Christie was a devotee, and rarely did she miss the chapel services. On Sundays, she would be the first person to enter the chapel and probably the last to leave. I wonder if she ever visited the Kodaikanal International School's chapel again after that terrifying incident. She was too light-hearted for that.

It was the last Sunday of June. The weather was gloomy, and the skies were dark. The lights had gone out in the morning because of heavy storm. As I visited each room to tell the students not to panic, I noticed that Claudia was missing. On enquiring to her roommate, I learned that she had told her that she was off to a yoga class. "Hmm, this is new," I thought to myself. As I reached the last room which was near the balcony, I saw a dark figure walk hurriedly towards the garden area behind the chapel. Because of the

dusky clouds and the dusty, harsh winds, I could not comprehend who that was. But I did notice that the figure wore a thick, black coat and a black cap just like that of Matthews. He carried a huge bag that looked unusually brown, almost like a sack on his back as he trod fighting against the wind. It was quite early to see someone approaching the chapel at this hour. It was just 7 am. I knew Christie would leave for the chapel in forty minutes as she loved an empty chapel. I couldn't wait to learn from her about what was up after she was back. My instincts were quite certain that something wasn't right and that the last Sunday of June, 2014 was going to change the history of the school.

"Hey Claudia! Did you wake up too early today?" Claudia was silent. She didn't even bother to look at Christie. It was 7.45 am and Christie did not wish to bother her early in the morning. Plus, it seemed as if Claudia was engrossed in prayers with her head down and back leaning against the wooden bench. Her face was hidden with her hair on both the sides and Christie could not see her face. She sat motionless for the next 15 minutes. Christie, being a soft-hearted person, decided to be there for Claudia as usual, assuming that it was one of the days when she broke down at the chapel. She leaned a little to look at her and held her hand to tell her that everything was going to be okay but she was freezing. Christie tried to tap on her shoulder and with a thud Claudia's upper body fell on the bench. What Christie saw traumatized her for the rest of her life- bloodshot eyes staring at her and bluish fingerprints on her Claudia's neck. "AAHH," she let out a scream. The service was about to commence and the incoming people were shocked to see one girl trembling with fear and the other, dead.

My assumption was right. The dark shadowy figure that morning was Mr. Matthews. Dude is counting the bars of the cell currently. He placed Claudia's body in the chapel to cover up for his misdeeds. Miss Jane later told me that she had gone to visit Matthews in the prison and learned the mystery. His undying love for her made him open up to her.

Claudia, seeking solace in Mr. Matthews as her counselor, discovered that she is the granddaughter of Raj Anna. This revelation drove Matthews to the brink of madness. Consumed by his obsession, he began to harass Claudia, deriving a twisted satisfaction from touching her, driven by the resentment towards Raj Anna for the affair with his ex-wife. As Matthews' harassment escalated, Claudia hid the bruises from his advances beneath hoodies and heavy concealer. One day, she donned her grandfather's turtleneck, hoping to conceal the marks on her body. Determined to confront Matthews, she entered his office, feigning indifference about the secret of her lineage. She claimed that, as a mean girl, she was unfazed by any potential exposure, asserting that no one liked her anyway.

Matthews, overwhelmed by his uncontrollable rage and desire, attempted to forcefully

restrain her. In a fit of fury, he gripped her neck with such intensity that Claudia collapsed, dead. His intentions were to choke her sexually, but his grip was so tight that the foolish man ended up murdering that poor girl.

"I really hope whatever he narrated to you is true," I said to Jane. As I was leaving for Madurai that evening, I saw Christie from my car. She smirked at me. I still wonder what that suspicious expression from the most innocent girl of the school meant. Am I thinking too much? Or, do some dots still remain disconnected?