

# SEARCH FOR SELF

A person wearing a dark hooded jacket and pants stands in a field of tall, golden-brown grass. They are facing away from the camera, looking towards a bright sun that is low on the horizon, creating a strong lens flare effect. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, and the overall atmosphere is warm and contemplative.

**NUPUR DWIVEDI PANDEY**

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## CHAPTER 1

# BINDASS WORLD

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Abhya was a happy-go-lucky girl who had no worries, barring academics which was always a point of contention. However, more or less, her life was sorted. She never tried too hard and was happy with what she had, and if she wasn't, the world wouldn't know because her family would hear no end of it. They were patient and fun people who took everything in their stride. All in all, her troubles, if any, started with what if she did not complete her assignment, sometimes an argument with a friend which would sort out eventually or a general feeling of well-being.

Abhya's brother, Raghav, was 7 years older than her and was a practicing lawyer with one of the most reputed law firms in India. Her father, Dr Shailendra Makhija, was a professor of economics in Purvanchal University and mother, Dr Jyoti Makhija, was working in State Bank of India. From an early age, Abhya had been taught the value of independence and the responsibility which came with it. Dr Jyoti ensured that her daughter knew how to stand up for herself and how important it was to be able to think in depth before taking any action.

Abhya did not really think much of these so-called life lessons during her education, except that she was supposed to follow them, and there was no point or need to think or feel otherwise. Her parents knew what they were talking about and she had no reason what so ever to put the lessons to test. Although some would get her frustrated, they were not enough to really change her happy state of mind.

Once her results for final exams of Economics Hons came out, her parents wanted to know what to do next. Abhya was clueless. All her friends were going for higher studies. She also had thought of doing the same. But something wasn't quite right. Then one day, a friend approached her with a job opening in a marketing research company. It was an entry-level position with good learning opportunity and good perks. The only flip side was that the position was based out in Delhi.

Abhya was way too excited. YES! She said to herself.

“This is what I have been waiting for. What could be better than this?” She was confident that her parents will support her. Obviously, they have been doing so all her life, and this was a lifetime opportunity. She rushed home to share the news with her father.

“Papa, Ayush called”. She told her father as soon as he returned from the

college.

Dr Makhija looked at her with an apparent frown on his face, which was more like “Ayush, who?” Abhya under any other circumstances would probably have waited to see her father’s expression but she continued in the same breath. “He has offered me a job in Delhi with a marketing research company. He has joined them recently, and now, they are looking for another researcher. I am so excited. He wants me to come and attend the interview. I told him that I am interested and would be willing to appear for an interview. Ayush told me that there is a late evening train to Delhi which will help me get there at around dawn. I can leave on Tuesday and will be back on Thursday”. She pretty much finished the sentence in a single breath. Her face was glowing with anticipation and excitement.

“No”, her father said. His face was expressionless so she probably thought she heard him wrong and looked at him for confirmation. However, from his another look, she could tell her father meant business. She was confused. So she checked with him again. “What!” It was more a disbelief. “You are not going”, her father said nonchalantly. He then settled himself on his reading chair as usual once he was back from work.

Abhya was still confused, “but Papa, this is a one-time opportunity and I have to go. I will never get this again. And Ayush is also there. I will get so much to learn. And they are paying good money also”.

“We don’t need the money; we are doing pretty well, Abhya”. Her father cut her off in the middle. His voice was getting sombre.

Abhya had no idea where this was coming from. This was so new to her. Her father had always been the one to support her with everything she had asked for then what now. In her last and slightly desperate attempt, she again tried, “Papa, I have got to try at least once”.

Dr Makhija not willing to take the discussion any further said, “Let your mother come back. We will discuss it then”. The hope was enough for Abhya to hang on for another hour of wait. As soon as her mother returned from work, she pulled her aside and said, “Ma, I don’t get it, I am getting this opportunity and Papa won’t let me go to Delhi for an interview. It’s unreasonable...”.

Jyoti was taken aback with her daughter’s sudden outburst. She was confused and worried at the same time. However, she knew better so she simply said, “Abhya, take a deep breath and tell me what happened”.

Abhya elaborated the day’s incident to her mother. Her mother listened patiently. After Abhya was done, she simply said, “Let me speak to your

father”.

After dinner, Jyoti spoke to Shailendra regarding her discussion with Abhya. Shailendra was very clear, “Of course I said No! There is no way I am sending my daughter off to a big city without knowing anything about the job and that too just because a friend of hers said that she will fit the bill”. He sounded frustrated. Jyoti could immediately sense the worry and fear from his perspective. She had always been the composed one of the two.

“Shailendra, Abhya looks at this as her one and only chance and we have got to find a way to support her and if we can send Raghav away to pursue his dreams, then why not Abhya”. Jyoti knew how strongly Shailendra felt about their daughter’s safety. But theirs had never been the family which had ever discriminated between their children especially on counts of gender. Then, why start now. She continued, “Let her follow her dreams”.

Shailendra wasn’t convinced. “I am sorry but this is simply not possible. She will have to let this go”. And with that, he went back to reading his book.

Jyoti knew it was pointless trying to convince her husband now. So she decided to wait till the next morning after Abhya left for her guitar classes. It was a Sunday the next day so she would have more time to sit and talk to him.

Next morning, Abhya came directly into the kitchen to catch hold of her mother before her father is back from his morning walk. “Did you speak to him? What did he say? Can I go?” Jyoti could sense the desperation and panic in her daughter’s voice. Clearly, she hadn’t slept. She told her daughter in a calming tone, “Yes, we discussed. He is not convinced. I will speak to him again. But there is something I need to ask you first”. “Anything Ma!”.

“What is more important for you appearing for this interview or going to Delhi for this interview by yourself?”

Abhya instantly said, “both”, with a smile. Jyoti was not amused. “You have got to pick”, she said firmly.

Abhya said after some thought, “I guess it would have to be the interview”. “OK, you better get going for your class”. Jyoti went on to prepare the breakfast. Abhya realized that there was nothing much she could do beyond this, so she left for class.

On the breakfast table, Jyoti looked at her husband. Shailendra knew that his wife would again want to discuss. So he said,

“Jyoti, we are not discussing Abhya again”.

“Just hear me out once and take a call”, Jyoti insisted. Shailendra knew his wife and the fact that she wouldn’t have insisted if she did not see the



value. So he nodded. Jyoti continued,

“We have always believed in our daughter and this is an opportunity that she believes is right for her. Just because we have our fears, we cannot let them overshadow her choices. With regard to her safety, if you do feel the need I will accompany her to Delhi for the interview. Will that allay some of your concerns?” For the first time, Shailendra was looking at this as a possibility. “Let me speak to Abhya when she comes back”, he told his wife.

Abhya met her father in the study room. For the first time, she was afraid of him, which was a weird feeling. What had happened? How can a single incident redefine the father–daughter relationship? Suddenly, a strong feeling of patriarchy loomed over the house which was new to her. Her father said,

“Your mother tells me how important this interview is for you, and hence, I am allowing you to go based on one condition that your mother accompanies you to Delhi for the same”.

Each and every word was laced with authority and was meant coming as an instruction. There was no dialogue, and given the situation, Abhya knew it is better not to argue. She simply thanked her father and left the room.

She called Ayush immediately thereafter and requested him to forward her CV to the company’s HR.

Abhya was on her way to Delhi with her mother in the next train. As she looked out of her window, she has mixed feelings—an excitement of experiencing something new and at the same time a confusion because it was much more than fear. In fact, Abhya had not known fear till then. All she could tell was that there are some questions needed to be answered and some more to be asked.



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**THE THRILL, CHILL, GRILL & DRILL**

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Abhya was sitting outside the room waiting to be called in for her interview. Her mother was also waiting in the lobby. It was almost 4:30 pm now, and they had already waited for two hours.

What kind of company was this? Jyoti thought to herself. They had a late evening train back to Jaunpur. She couldn't afford to miss it. She wanted to just get up and leave. This is no way to treat a candidate. You don't make them wait. But she had promised herself. This was going to be Abhya's fight. And she will have to be the judge. So she sat there; her anxiety was growing with each passing minute.

In a room not far away, Abhya sat feeling more scared. What is taking so long? She hadn't been able to speak to Ayush and hadn't seen him also. What was going on? Should she have listened to her father? Did she make a mistake coming here? Oh God! She will hear no end of it. What would her mother think? Everyone in this place looked so aloof. She felt out of place, and she wanted to run away. The more she thought of it, the more nervous she became. Then, she caught herself. She can't afford this now. She needed to brighten up. She had read about power posing by Amy Cuddy. In the quiet room, she quickly used the technique and brought herself back to the composed, confident self; then she heard the call:

“Abhya Makhija”.

She immediately picked her papers up and went inside the room. The panel though impeccably dressed must have been in their late 20s. She was confused. Was she in the wrong room? This couldn't possibly be the panel. She waited at the door, and then softly asked for permission to enter. “Sir, May I come in”.

The three panellists looked up at her and one of them motioned her to enter. He offered her a seat opposite to theirs. The room was covered with different graphics, charts and advertisements. It was a simple boardroom setup. The panellists introduced themselves as Chetan, Avdesh and John. Apparently, John was the senior most of the three, deduced Abhya by their conversations.

Chetan started the interview. He was friendly. In fact, all three were.

“Hi Abhya, welcome to MarRes. We are a marketing research company aimed at ensuring the best for our client. Are you aware what a Marketing



Research company does?”

“Not much in detail but I am aware that MarRes has managed to quadruple its clients base and has expanded its target area from India to China, Singapore, Philippines and Australia in the last 5 years of operation with its clients ranging from media houses to hospitality industry and is now looking at expanding itself into medical and pharmaceutical sectors as well”. Abhya said calmly with a lot of conviction.

“Hmm. We see you have done your homework”, John said. “I believe this is mostly on our website. Now based on this, I want you to tell me something that is not”.

Abhya thought for a moment, this wasn't difficult. In fact while studying the company, she had thought about this. However, the turmoil she was facing was, whether she should mention it or not. Her mother had always told her to be upfront and honest. Was interview the right time? All these thoughts raced through her mind.

“We are waiting, Abhya”. She heard John's voice cutting her train of thoughts.

“Yes, Sir. Er. Eh. Well” she faltered.

“Please call me John and feel free to say anything”. John sensed the nervousness in Abhya's voice.

“Well, sir, I mean John, I think it's great that the company is growing at such a fast pace and also that it has expanded itself geographically. My doubt was pertaining to its recent plans of entering medical and pharmaceutical sectors. There are a lot of risks involved in the same and do you think our company is ready to take the challenge head-on in such a risky environment? Having said that I have full faith in MarRes leadership and team, and that they will ensure that the strategy is successfully implemented”. Though the lines weren't rehearsed, it still came naturally to her. Probably, the sandwich approach of feedback that her mother had been professing all through her career worked today.

John, Chetan and Avdesh looked at each other. If they were impressed or upset, their faces didn't say. John simply has a slight nod to Avdesh who looked at Abhya with the next question.

“So you stay in Jaunpur”.

“Yes, sir”.

“And you know the job is based out in Delhi”.

“Yes, sir”.

“Avdesh please, we are all on a first-name basis. Hmm, have you ever lived away from Jaunpur?”

“No, I haven’t”.

“Do you have anyone you can stay with in Delhi?”

Abhya wasn’t sure where this was leading or how this was relevant. As far as she was concerned, she was there to get a job based on how well she knew her subject and not whether or not she could get a lodging arrangement. She was beginning to get uncomfortable. She answered nonetheless.

“No I don’t have any place to stay yet, but I will find one once I get this job”.

John seemed amused by her confidence but said nothing. Avdesh continued. It seemed to Abhya that he was enjoying himself.

“How will you manage in a big city like Delhi coming from a small town like Jaunpur?” This was truly a test of Abhya’s patience now. The question was discriminatory and unwarranted.

Abhya needed to put an end to this, but she did not also want to rush into making conclusions. Should she let herself be subjected to such bias? Then, she looked at Avdesh and realized that he meant this question in all sincerity. She was surprised at his ignorance to say the least and then in a way that one would explain to a child, she tried answering the question.

“I am aware that the culture would be different in Delhi vis-à-vis Jaunpur, but I believe people everywhere are just caring and accommodating. That will help me settle in this city as well”.

“Hmm”, Avdesh said. He looked at John and Chetan and said, “I have no further questions”.

Chetan then took over again. His questions were more generic.

“If offered this job, how soon can you join us?”

“I will need 15 days from the time of receiving of the offer”, she replied.

“What are your salary expectations?”

This was rehearsed. She had checked with Ayush and her mentor in college. Both had advised the same: “As per the industry standards”.

Chetan looked up at her with a whimsical look in his eyes. He continued, “This job requires late working hours and occasional travelling. What are your thoughts on that?”

Abhya paused for a moment. For the first time in the entire interview, she did not know how she felt. Was she OK? Was she not OK? What was the correct answer to this question? She was stumped.

Then choosing her words very carefully, she said, “Travelling for work, I understand would be required and I am OK with that. Late hours, I am not sure. What I am sure and also ensure is that I don’t procrastinate”.

The answer was smartly worded or so Abhya thought. The three panellists looked at each other and then smiled at Abhya. John made the concluding statement. That will be all from us. If they were satisfied with the answers, their face wouldn’t tell.

“Do you have any questions for us?” He asked Abhya.

Abhya looked at the watch. It was already 5:40 pm. She had 100 questions, but also a train at 9:25 pm. She quickly looked up and said “No sir”.

“OK Abhya. We will get back to you in a day or two”. Chetan said standing up almost as a cue to Abhya. Abhya hurriedly stood up, almost dropping her phone in the process.

“Thank you. It was a pleasure meeting all of you”.

With that, she left the room. She didn’t even hear so much as a whisper behind her.

She met her mother in the lobby. “How did it go?” Jyoti asked. “Don’t know, Ma! Just said what came to my mind?” replied Abhya.

Jyoti couldn’t make out what was going on in her daughter’s mind. She was surprisingly closed for the cheerful, confident self. Jyoti let her be.

They left for the station. Abhya was surprisingly quiet throughout the journey to home.

When they reached home, Shailendra had already left for work. Jyoti was also supposed to join work that day so she also left after a while. Abhya was left all alone. There were millions of questions running in her mind. There it was, over. She had given the interview. This is what she had wanted, to be able to go and give the interview. But what now? She hadn’t really thought beyond that. Avdesh’s questions kept haunting her. The reality of the situation had begun to hit her now. She had never lived away from her parents and that too in a city like Delhi. She has heard horrendous tales about the security of girls in Delhi. Papa will never allow it. And I will never be able to work late hours. She secretly began wishing that she doesn’t get the job. She also felt she couldn’t share her dilemma with her parents. What was she to do now?

Shailendra came back from work and was exhilarated to find her daughter back home. Two days without her were nothing less than a torture. Even before he entered the house, he fired the questions. “How was it? What happened? How did you find the company?”

Abhya was surprised to see her father’s sudden enthusiasm.

“It was OK Papa”. She answered softly.

“So when will you come to know of the results? I have told all my friends that you are getting a job in Delhi”. Shailendra was unable to hide his enthusiasm. In fact, he expressed it a little too strongly for Abhya’s comfort level. The sudden display of eagerness caught Abhya off guard. While she was expecting resistance from her father, there was somewhere a hope that it would be her saving grace from the life of a city. What had happened in the two days? In fact, it seemed to her that her father who was continuously supporting her was back.

She kept looking at him. Shailendra suddenly realized that he had said too much in his excitement.

He cleared his throat, just to gain composure. “So, what is now?” He asked her, settling down with the cup of tea that Abhya had handed over to him.

“Well, I received a phone call a while back. I have been asked to join in 15 days. They are paying me a salary of Rs 25,000 pm. plus perks, and initial moving in charges to the city will also be borne by them”. Her face was expressionless. With that, Abhya left for her room.

Shailendra stood in his room, with a variety of emotions, shock, awe, pride and confusion, to name a few. Why was she not happy? Had something happened during the interview? Wasn’t this her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? His confusion grew from anxiety to frustration to anger. He should have never let her go. He should have listened to his instincts. He wanted to read his daughter’s mind, to understand her emotions and to save her from something that he envisaged could have happened, but he couldn’t do anything. He felt helpless.

By the time Jyoti returned from work, Shailendra had already thought of worst. He bombarded her with questions and accusations.

“I told you it was a bad idea for our daughter to go for the interview. You were supposed to take care of her. What happened? Why isn’t she talking? She should be excited and happy that she got the job. But why she isn’t happy? What is wrong?”

“What? She got the job! That is great”. Jyoti immediately rushed to Abhya’s room and hugged her, ignoring other comments from her husband. She just wanted to be happy for her daughter. “Congratulations sweetie!”

“Thanks, Ma” Abhya replied softly.

“What’s the matter? You don’t seem very excited. Is this not what you wanted?” Jyoti asked her daughter.

“I did Ma but...” her voice trailed off.

“I told you not to let her go. See now, she has started hiding things from us”. Shailendra cut in.

Jyoti realized that unless she spoke to Shailendra and addressed his issues, she would be able to find out what is bothering Abhya.

“Abhya let me speak to your father and then we will talk. Is that okay?” Jyoti wanted to make sure her daughter was fine with the decision and could wait for some time.

Abhya nodded. Jyoti left the room.

Shailendra was busy pacing and about to light a cigarette, a habit which he had given up when Abhya was born. “What is the matter Shailendra? Why this sudden outburst?” Jyoti asked taking the cigarette from his hand.

“I am just scared”. He sounded like a desperate little child. “I wanted to be okay with it but I am not, I just am not! Two days she wasn’t around and it was difficult. To imagine her gone for a longer period is like a torture. One day she will have to be married and moved away to her own house, then why now. Why are we in a hurry?” Shailendra was practically pleading to Jyoti.

Jyoti sat down. She had never seen him so broken. His fear was getting better of him and Jyoti knew that if nothing, it would only lead to an unhappy person, which was nobody else but himself. She said and this time very softly, “Parenting is hard and one of the things that we need to learn as parents is to let go”. Shailendra looked at his wife as if to say something and then looked down again.

She continued, “I know it’s easier said than done. But we let Raghav go”.

“That was different” retorted Shailendra.

“And that is because!” Jyoti exclaimed.

“Well, because Raghav could have taken care of himself. And...”

Jyoti’s frustration knew no bounds. However, she knew that fear could not be won with reasoning; it needed compassion and empathy. She decided that

the father–daughter duo required a break. So she planned an outing the next evening.

The tension hung heavily in the house the whole day. The next evening, Shailendra, Jyoti and Abhya went for a dinner to a local restaurant. Jyoti did a little ice breaking. She had prearranged a cake to celebrate her daughter’s first achievement in her career. She had also request Shailendra to just follow the lead. Shailendra loved his daughter and wanted to see her happy at any cost.

Abhya was still gloomy. As they started their dinner, Jyoti told Abhya. “We are very proud of you dear, and we assure you have our full support. What we don’t understand is why you are not happy? What is troubling you? You know you can talk to us”.

Abhya started speaking softly, “Ma, Papa...”

“Go on dear”.

“I am scared. I wanted to be okay with it. I am not. I just am not. Why do I have to go now? Anyways, I will get married someday and move away. What is the hurry for me to take up this job?”

Shailendra and Jyoti were dumbfounded. Was this some kind of joke? Did she hear their conversation last night? That was not like Abhya. This was their little girl afraid to grow up. Her fears were as real as theirs.

And at that moment, Shailendra suddenly knew what he had to say!

He moved over to Abhya and put an arm around her, comforting her, and said, “Abhya, you have always made me proud, and this time you have managed to do it yet again. Your mother and I understand your fear, we really do. And that is why, we want you to go ahead and take this opportunity as a challenge, not for anyone else, but for yourself. And we are right here, a call away. Just call us when you need and we will come. It’s the time that you tell the world what Abhya Makhija is made of”.

Abhya’s father had always been an inspiration to her, and today, his words worked like magic. At that moment, she felt a huge weight off her shoulders and she felt free of so many doubts. She still did not have the answers but felt strong enough to be able to manage them.

Yes, the world was at her feet.





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