

# THE MIDDLE BENCHERS

T. NARAYAN



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New Delhi • London

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India | U.K.

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ISBN: 978-93-7310-284-9

Typesetting: Namrata Saini

First Edition: December 2025

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The book is written purely for entertainment, reflecting the humorous and nostalgic spirit of college and hostel life. Situations, dialogues, and characters are exaggerated for comic and dramatic effect. The author does not intend to offend, defame, or misrepresent any person, group, or institution.

All opinions expressed by the characters are fictional and do not represent the personal beliefs or views of the author or any associated organization. Reader discretion is advised.

— **T. Narayan**



# Acknowledgement

This book is not just a collection of stories — it's a piece of my life, shaped and strengthened by the person who believed in me when I doubted myself.

My deepest gratitude to my wife, Gitanjali, whose unwavering faith turned this dream into reality. If it weren't for her constant encouragement, patience, and quiet strength, *The Middle Benchers* would have remained just an idea in my mind. She gave me time when I needed space, nurture when I needed hope, and her gentle voice always reminded me — “You can do it.”

Through every late night, every rewrite, and every moment of uncertainty, she stood beside me, holding my hand and keeping me grounded. This book is as much hers as it is mine.

— T. Narayan



## **From the Author's Pen**

If we go by the word itself, Middle Benchers isn't something new — but the feeling behind it certainly is. We've all heard enough about front benchers — the brilliant, disciplined ones — and back benchers — the notorious legends of every class. But the middle benchers? They've never really got their share of fame, even though they're the ones who truly keep the system running — whether it's school or college.

In every class, there may be seven or eight students sitting in the front benches, and the same in the back — but the middle benches? They hold the majority, the heartbeat of the class. They're the bridge — between the sincere and the mischievous, the studious and the carefree. They connect both worlds — sharing notes, jokes, and secrets alike.

The front benchers may not even notice what happens behind them, and the back benchers rarely care about what's happening in front — but the middle benchers see it all. They balance both sides, keep the atmosphere light, and ensure the classroom stays alive.

Think of them as the middle finger in a fist — not the most decorated, not the most noticed, but the one that gives strength and balance to the entire hand. They may stay quiet, but when they rise — everyone notices.

Just like the middle class that silently runs the nation, it's the middle benchers who quietly keep college life moving. They don't make headlines, but they make the memories.

— T. Narayan





# Preface

The year was 2002 — a time when the world was slower, friendships were deeper, and laughter echoed louder through hostel corridors than any ringtone ever could. Life in Patna then was simple, unpredictable, and delightfully alive. There were no smartphones to capture the moments, yet every memory remains as vivid as yesterday — the smell of chai in the canteen, the late-night hostel whispers, the thrill of a first movie at Mona Theatre, and the endless jokes that turned ordinary days into lifelong stories.

The Middle Benchers is not just a collection of tales; it is a journey back to those carefree years when life revolved around attendance, assignments, and adventure. The stories here are born from the raw, unfiltered spirit of youth — of boys who dreamed big, laughed louder, and somehow stumbled their way through college without losing their sense of humour.

This book is a humble attempt to relive that golden time — to bring back the sound of laughter, the smell of rain on Patna's roads, and the innocence of days when the biggest worry was a surprise test or a missed meal at the mess.

To every reader who has ever lived in a hostel, bunked a class, or found a home among friends — this one is for you.

— T. Narayan



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# CHAPTER 1

## Sonar Wave

It all began on a morning that felt far more dramatic than it needed to be. As I stepped onto the college campus for the very first time, I was hit by a full-blown emotional rollercoaster—equal parts excitement, panic, and the sinking. My heart was thumping like I'd just had three cups of coffee (I hadn't—even I couldn't mess up that early). With every step, I grew more lost. Was the Computer Science Block north of the canteen or west of wherever I was currently having this small breakdown?

After doing two full laps around the same suspicious-looking fountain and nearly walking into what I now suspect was the girls' hostel, I finally admitted defeat. The “confident new student” act was officially over.

Swallowing what little pride I had left, I headed to the college office—the holy temple of direction, attendance registers, and hopefully, a kind soul who wouldn't laugh at my completely blank face. All I wanted was someone to point me in the right direction... or at least away from the Chemistry lab, where things already smelled like urinate and formaldehyde.

And that's when he appeared — the man in black, the guard — thumping tobacco in his palm and asking, “क्या हुआ, बाबू साहब?” (What happened, sir?)

I asked him, “Where's the office?”

He didn't bother with words—just rolled his eyes toward the sky, nodded like a sage, and somehow managed to convey that the office was on the first floor, across the hall, in that orange building.

Honestly, it felt less like directions and more like a riddle from a bored security guard.

Following his directions, I found the office—and there, I met the clerk. But not just *any* clerk. This was **Mr. Rambabu Pandey**, a name that sounded like it should come with its own background music and slow-motion entry.

He stood tall—like, *absurdly* tall. Easily six feet two, maybe three, depending on his shoes and the weather. His skin was so fair he could've been mistaken for a foreigner, and on his forehead sat a perfectly applied sandalwood tilak—less “I’m spiritual” and more “don’t mess with me, I run this place.”

His Hindi? Oh, poetic. Crisp, confident, and so grammatically perfect it made my high school Hindi teacher weep in my memories. He spoke like Doordarshan news anchors from the 90’s—flawless, dramatic, and with zero room for nonsense.

There was an unmistakable aura about him—a calm, quiet authority that could silence a noisy corridor and scare a middle and backbencher straight. Just one glance, and I knew: **this man didn’t just sign documents—he signed destinies**. Honestly, I hadn’t even said a word, and I already felt like I’d disappointed him.

I gathered every ounce of courage I had, walked up to Mr. Rambabu Pandey—*The Man, The Myth, The Clerk*—and said, with what I hoped was confidence, “Sir, today’s the first day of college... and I think I’m the only one who showed up.”

He didn’t say a word. Just stared at me. Slowly. Up and down. Like a scanner deciding whether I was student material or a suspicious salesman trying to sell encyclopaedias.

To be fair, I *did* look like I was either here for an interview or a bartender. Suit and tie, shiny boots, a bag so heavy it could double as gym equipment—basically, the full “I’m very serious about my future” starter pack.

Then, without breaking his majestic silence, Mr. Pandey turned dramatically toward the window, leaned out... and expertly launched a stream of betel juice into the bushes like a spitting cobra. Only then did he speak.

“First year?” he asked, his voice deep and echoing, like a temple bell on Monday morning.

“Yes, sir,” I nodded, standing straighter.

He gave a small smile—the kind that said *“Oh, sweet innocent kid.”*

“Very good,” he said. “But... why have you come today?”

I blinked. “Because... today *is* the first day of college. That’s what the official letter said,” I replied, now unsure if I’d read it right or hallucinated the whole thing.

He chuckled softly, the way elders do when you try to explain the internet to them. And at that moment, I knew: **Either I was early... or this college was running on a completely different calendar.**

As Mr. Pandey began to respond, he continued chewing his betel leaf with great dedication—like it was a gourmet delicacy and not a fiery red mouth-paint. He was clearly trying to share something important, something wise, maybe even life-changing... but his words came out in a slow, syrupy slur, soaked in paan juice and mystery.

“Bhhoou toh... aaajjj...ehhh...” I blinked. Was he casting a spell?

The red juice in his mouth glistened like tomato ketchup under a spotlight. Occasionally, a small drop would escape the corner of his lips and make a daring leap toward his chin. The whole thing had the rhythm of a folk performance—half conversation, half beatboxing.

His fair face, combined with the vivid red stains around his lips, gave off a strangely dramatic effect. He looked less like an office

clerk and more like a mythological character who'd just finished fighting a demon—and was now casually handling paperwork.

I stood there, nodding respectfully, while understanding about 60% of what he said and guessing the rest from hand gestures and context clues. It was like live subtitles were missing from this very important broadcast.

Still, he was trying. And that made it both oddly endearing... and slightly terrifying.

You could tell the man meant well—his intentions were pure, no doubt about it. But understanding him? That was a whole different adventure. Honestly, it required a *lot* of patience... and a *wild* imagination.

His words came through like a thick fog—cloudy and twisted, losing their sharpness before they even reached my ears. The sounds that flowed from his lips bore an uncanny quality, akin to the **sonar calls** of whales communicating in the deep blue ocean.

Honestly, the sounds coming out of his mouth had the same soothing-yet-baffling vibe as two whales chatting across the Pacific. Long, wavy syllables, rising and falling like they were echoing off coral reefs. I half-expected Bare Grills to start narrating: *“Here we observe the rare College species (Clerk) attempting human communication...”*

Each syllable seemed to ripple and float, creating a rhythm that was both mysterious and strangely beautiful—like the haunting calls of creatures trying to connect across a vast, unknown sea.

It felt as if his speech was wrapped in layers of mystery, turning the simple act of listening into something almost magical—a moment where understanding went beyond words and entered a strange, mesmerizing place. With his words still tangled in the effects of the betel, he said in a slurred voice, “Sure, brother, but come back in ten days. Classes haven’t started yet.”



I looked at him, puzzled. “But sir, wasn’t college supposed to start today?”

He gave a lazy grin and replied, struggling a little with his words, “The college started a hundred years ago... should we go all the way back and start from then, just for you?”

I couldn’t help but smile at his dry humour. “No, sir,” I said, chuckling. “I don’t think I’m ready for ‘that’ much history.”

Before I could gather my thoughts or ask another question, he shut me down with startling abruptness.

“Come back in ten days,” he said firmly, punctuating the command with a quick wave of his hand, making it clear the conversation was over.

Just like that, he slipped back into his world, lost in the slow, rhythmic chewing of his betel leaf(paani). Silence settled around him as the red juice pooled in his mouth once more—a sight that was equal parts fascinating and unsettling.

I couldn’t help but feel a flicker of dread. If he decided to explain anything further mid-chew, I feared the results might be... catastrophic. And honestly, I wasn’t ready to risk that kind of trauma—especially not on my very first day of college.

Just as I was trying to decode Mr. Pandey’s latest paan-flavoured sentence, I noticed something that instantly cranked up my awkwardness to maximum: **three girls** sitting in the office, quietly observing my tragic first-day performance like it was live theatre.

They weren’t laughing—but oh, their eyes were definitely sparkling with mischief. The kind that says “*This is adorable... let’s watch how much worse it gets.*” When I nervously glanced in their direction, they flashed warm, dazzling smiles—the kind that could either make your day or make you forget your own name.

Two of them were dressed in those perfectly casual jeans and breezy tops—the kind of outfits that screamed, “*We woke up like this*” confidence. They carried themselves like they owned the campus... .

Their presence didn’t just brighten the room—it completely overpowered the smell of paan and paperwork.

The third girl, though, was a whole different vibe. While the other two looked like they’d just walked out of a college magazine shoot, she looked like she’d stepped straight out of a beautifully shot family movie—graceful, traditional, and kind of glowing.

She wore a gorgeous embroidered salwar kameez that flowed around her like it had its own slow-motion setting. Every time she moved, it was like a gentle breeze had been specially arranged just for her. I half-expected background music to start playing.

But what really caught my eye—and refused to let go—was something so small, most people wouldn’t even notice it: **one of her eyes was ever-so-slightly smaller than the other**. That tiny imperfection didn’t take away charm from her beauty—it actually *made* it. It was like nature had added a signature flourish. Real, human, and somehow... way more enchanting than flawless could ever be.

As I stepped out of the office—still recovering from the emotional rollercoaster that was Mr. Pandey’s paan-powered statement—I heard laughter behind me. Light, musical laughter. The kind that makes you feel like everything might just be okay after all.

I turned slightly and there they were—the three power puffed girls, walking a few steps behind me, chatting and giggling like they’d just witnessed the most entertaining thing of the morning.

Their voices floated through the hallway like sunshine on a chilly winter morning—warm, bright, and impossible to ignore. I had no idea who they were. I didn’t know their names or if they’d ever speak to me again. But right then, in that very moment, it felt

like the universe had opened a tiny door marked “*Something Interesting Might Happen Here.*”

And for the first time that day, I smiled... like an idiot. A hopeful idiot.

Just as I was heading down the stairs, I heard a voice call out from behind, “Hey, first-year students, listen up!”

I stopped in my tracks and turned around. One of the girls from the office stepped forward with a curious look in her eyes.

“Do you know who we are?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No.”

“We’re your seniors—third-year students,” she said proudly.

I quickly replied, “Yes, दीदी.”(elder sister)

Her expression changed instantly. “Call me \*ma’am\*, not दीदी,” she snapped, clearly not amused.

I corrected myself right away. “Okay, ma’am.”

She crossed her arms. “Where are you from?”

“From Katihar,” I answered.

“Katihar? Where’s that?”

“It’s about 320 kilometers from Patna,” I explained.

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh really? So you travel that far every day?”

I shook my head. “No, ma’am. I’m staying in Patna now.”

“Where in Patna?” another girl chimed in.

“Boring Road,” I said.

They all burst out laughing. “Boring Road? Are you living on the road? Couldn’t find a proper house?”

I smiled awkwardly and said, “No, ma’am, I’ve rented a flat.”

One of them leaned in with a mischievous grin. “Are you living alone, or your parents staying with you?”

“I’m living alone,” I replied honestly.

She grinned wider. “Then we’ll come and stay with you!”

Out of nowhere, a full-blown panic attack hit me like a popcorn popping out of pan. My mouth opened like a frog, and before my brain could stop it, a bunch of nervous, jumbled words spilled out like marbles on a tiled floor—loud, clumsy, and completely uncontrollable.

That’s when it hit me: **I had no idea how to talk to girls.** Zero. Zilch. Nada.

See, I grew up in a small, ultra-conservative town—the kind of place where even accidental eye contact with a girl could trigger a family summit and a full-blown moral lecture. Smile at one, and it was headline news. Talk to her, and you might as well prepare for social exile. At home, a simple “hello” to a female classmate could easily escalate into an episode straight out of *CID*. (कुछ तो गड़बड़ है, दया!) Something’s fishy, Daya!

So now, standing in this shiny new world of college life—where boys and girls talked *freely*, like it was no big deal—I felt like someone had pushed me into the deep end of a swimming pool with no floaties and said, “Swim, champ!”

My heart was thumping like a dhol at a wedding, sweat was forming in places I didn’t know could sweat, and my brain? Oh, it had left the building. All I could do was stand there, awkward and confused, a living, breathing example of “first-day jitters”—version: small-town edition.

Suddenly, all three of them burst into laughter—the kind that echoes down hallways and makes you wonder if maybe, just maybe, you’re not totally doomed. It wasn’t mean or mocking. It was the good kind—the “you’re adorable and don’t even know it” kind. Then one of them stepped forward, the one with a mischievous sparkle in

her eyes, clearly the team captain of this trio of charm. She grinned at me and said, “My name’s **Lavanyamayi**.”

I nodded, trying to play it cool, while my brain scrambled to remember how to pronounce that without biting my own tongue.

She leaned in slightly and added with a laugh, “But don’t worry, I’m just messing with you!”

Her voice was playful, her tone warm—like she had known me.

“So, you’re just starting today, huh?” one of them said, tilting her head with a friendly smile that could melt away anxiety faster than a plate of hot coffee.

“If you ever get lost, confused, or just feel like talking to someone who actually knows where the classrooms are—come find us!”

Her voice was warm and casual, like she was offering a cup of chai, not a life raft. And just like that, something in me unclenched. Their kindness, their easy smiles—it all felt like a surprise plot twist in what had so far been a tragic comedy starring *Me: The Lost Fresher*.

In a world that, up until five minutes ago, felt like a chaotic maze of buildings, timetables, and betel-juice-spitting clerks, For the first time that day, *college didn’t seem terrifying*. It actually started to feel... kind of exciting.

As our little conversation gently fizzled into a comfortable silence, I took a deep breath and stepped away from the college gates, feeling like I’d just survived my first boss fight. The midday sun was doing its thing—casting that dramatic golden glow on everything, as if even it approved of my social breakthrough.

I wandered over to the nearby auto-rickshaw stand, where a lineup of yellow-and-black three-wheelers stood like noisy, slightly judgmental bumble bees. I climbed into one that looked like it had *barely* passed its last fitness test and told the driver, “Boring Road.”

The auto gave a heroic cough, rattled a bit in protest—like it wasn't emotionally ready for the journey—and then jolted to life. Within seconds, we were off, weaving into the beautifully chaotic orchestra of honking cars, wandering cows, and pedestrians who clearly had no fear of death.

The auto-rickshaw zipped through the streets like it had somewhere *very* important to be—possibly a Formula 1 race I hadn't been informed about. We passed rows of shops and street vendors, the whole city buzzing like a giant, slightly chaotic beehive.

Schoolkids in perfectly creased uniforms dashed between snack stalls like they were on a secret mission, their giggles and shouts rising above the traffic like cheerful background music. A chaiwala expertly balanced a tray of steaming kulhads as if he'd trained with the Navy, while the rich, spicy smell of samosas floated into the auto like a surprise emotional ambush.

It hit me right in the nostalgia—samosas always do. For a second, I wasn't a confused college fresher in a rattling three-wheeler—I was back in my hometown, watching the world go by with greasy fingers and a happy heart.

As we rolled under the shade of an old, wise-looking banyan tree, I spotted a bunch of students lounging around its massive trunk. They were laughing, chatting, throwing around hand gestures like seasoned debaters—or maybe just arguing about who ate someone's lunch.

Their carefree vibe was on full display—bags tossed aside, shoes half-off, body language saying *"we've got all the time in the world."* It felt like a different universe from my own morning meltdown starring nerves, confusion, and Mr. Pandey's betel-powered Hindi.

And yet... something shifted. For the first time, I didn't feel like an alien who had crash-landed in College Planet.

For the first time, I thought, *"Maybe I'll fit in here too."*

As the auto rattled along, my thoughts wandered back to the three girls I'd met in the office—especially **Lavanyamayi**, with her razor-sharp wit and that smile that felt like sunshine dipped in mischief. She had this ease about her, the kind that made awkward first-year students like me feel just a little less hopeless. And even though we'd only exchanged a few words, something about her lingered in my mind longer than expected—like a catchy song you don't want to admit you like.

## CHAPTER 2

### Size 30

After surviving the wild jungle of college campus, I finally returned home—half a degree smarter, fully exhausted, and dangerously close to turning into a caffeine-powered zombie. The moment I stepped into my room, my few days old, loyal sanctuary, I threw my backpack onto the bed like it was a grenade and flopped down like a retired hero returning from war.

But peace didn't last long.

My stomach growled with the fury of a thousand unanswered questions. I needed food. Not a fancy five-course meal—just something edible, warm, and, most importantly, regular. A dependable tiffin service. Something that wouldn't ghost me after a week like my last gym plan Or Preferably one that didn't send cabbage curry every day. For the past few days, have been eating nearby hotels to meet my daily food needs. Which has caused cramps in my stomach.

So, like any hungry hyena on a mission, I wandered the streets of Punaichak—eyes sharp, nose sharper, stomach growling louder than a scooter with a broken silencer. That's when I struck gold.

A local tiffin service. Legendary among students, whispered about in lodges like some kind of secret food mafia. They offered monthly meal plans tailored for folks like me—young and constantly pretending to be busy.

And oh, the meals! Affordable enough that even my wallet breathed a sigh of relief, and balanced enough that my mother wouldn't launch a nutrition lecture after saw me. It wasn't five-star dining, but it was steady, soul-saving survival food. Fueled by boredom and a vague sense of adventure, I decided to explore the



area on foot. No grand plan—just me, my chappals, and a wildly optimistic belief that I wouldn't get lost.

As I wandered through the winding gullies like a confused tourist with no GPS, I found myself in the beating heart of student survival—Punaichak. The place was buzzing! Rented rooms stacked like Tetris blocks, shops selling everything from shampoo sachets to screwdrivers, and market stalls bursting with vegetables that looked slightly suspicious.

And that's when I met Badri bhaiya—right next to an old, grumpy-looking pump house that had clearly given up on life. The place belonged to the government, which explained a lot. Its walls were crumbling like old caves, and rusty pipes poked out of the ground like confused periscopes.

At the centre of this mess stood a well—freshly painted bright white, as if someone had tried to make it look important for a VIP visit that never happened. It gleamed awkwardly amidst the decay.

But what really got my attention was the big red warning painted across its side: **“Peeking into the well is prohibited.”**

Naturally, I immediately wanted to peek in.

Because if there's one thing we students specialize in—it's doing exactly what we're told *not* to do.

There he was—perched like a king on the wall right next to the “Don't Peek” sign, legs swinging happily as if he'd written the warning himself and was now guarding it out of boredom. He wore nothing but a humble white dhoti, loosely wrapped around his waist like lungi, it was both his uniform and fashion statement. His chest was bare and hairless, soaking up the sun like a seasoned sunbather who didn't believe in shirts or sunscreen.

He wasn't tall, but don't let that fool you. The man had the kind of physique that made you think twice before arguing about politics with him—solid arms, a belly that looked both majestic and well-

fed, and a presence that quietly screamed, *“I lift water tank for fun.”*  
*Charcoaled colour skin with bright white teeth.*

But the real showstopper? That mustache. Thick, bold, and curled at the ends like it had just finished doing yoga. It sat on his face with the confidence of a royal heirloom, practically demanding respect—and maybe a slow clap. That was Badri. And he looked like he knew every secret that well had ever heard.

I looked at him, trying to sound confident (and not like a starving student hunting rice), and asked, **“Are you the *tiffin wale bhaiya*?”**

He grinned like I’d just guessed his secret identity. **“Yes, sir!”** he said, with the enthusiasm of a man who took both his food and customer service seriously.

A quick chat followed—veg or non-veg, spicy or mild, how many chapatis before I start crying—and just like that, we struck a deal. ₹3,000 a month for two solid meals a day. I almost hugged him right there next to the “no peeking” sign.

There was only one tiny twist in the plot: an advance of ₹1,000 for the first fifteen days.

No big deal. I whipped out my wallet with the speed of a magician pulling out a rabbit. Cash handed. Deal sealed. Hunger officially handled.

After that, he returned to his cottage and brought out an old register, probably given by Lord Dalhousie to his grandfather. Its corners were worn and partly dissolved by moisture. In that register, he wrote down my name, address, advance payment, and food details.

It felt like I had just unlocked the cheat code to surviving college life.

He promised the tiffin would start that very evening, and I nodded like a patient monk who had attained inner peace. But my stomach? It had other ideas.

It growled so loudly, I'm pretty sure nearby dogs started barking in response. Waiting till evening felt like asking a volcano to chill until winter. The hunger was real, raw, and getting angrier by the minute. I couldn't take it anymore.

Without wasting a second—or saying a polite goodbye to Badri bhaiya—I set off on a desperate food hunt, eyes scanning for anything remotely edible. A restaurant, a stall, even a suspicious-looking cart... anything that could shut down the riot happening in my belly. Forget fine dining—I just needed food that didn't come in a packet or require boiling water.

Soon enough, like a thirsty traveller spotting an oasis—or in my case, a very hungry student spotting lunch—I found it. A small, no-nonsense place with a half-faded board that proudly read: **Bangali Hotel.**

Now, I had no idea what made it “Bangali.” Were they serving macher jhol? Rosogolla with a side of sarcasm? Or was it just a guy named Banwari who once visited Kolkata? I didn't know. But my stomach didn't care—it just yelled, “*GO IN!*”

So I did.

The place was humble. Okay, let's be honest—it looked like someone's storeroom that got repurposed after a family meeting. Two tiny rooms, plastic tables that wobbled like nervous interns, and chairs that made you question every life decision leading up to sitting on them.

But the smell? Oh man, the smell! It was divine. It floated out into the street like a gentle invitation from heaven's kitchen. Turmeric, garlic, something fried in mystery oil—it hit all the right notes. There was nothing fancy —no menus, no AC. Just good old “you eat, you burp, you bless us” kind of vibe. And that's exactly what I needed.

The moment I stepped in, a wave of warm, spicy aromas smacked me right in the face—in the best possible way. It was like a welcome hug from someone who smelled of mustard oil, fried

goodness, and pure love. Something was sizzling on a tawa nearby, making that mouthwatering *tsssss* sound that immediately convinces your stomach to shut up and behave.

A few ceiling fans spun overhead, doing the bare minimum—like they were on government project.

In one corner, an old man sat like he owned the place—or at least the chair. White vest, lungi, newspaper in hand, and a tiny glass of tea held like it was a fine whiskey. He looked like he had seen wars, famines, and at least three government changes, but right now, all he cared about was finishing that editorial and sipping his chai without interruption.

This, I thought, was the kind of place where meals came with stories—and probably a few extra chillies.

Behind the counter stood a cheerful, slightly sweaty man with a thick Bengali accent and the confidence of someone who knew his food was better than your future. He spotted me instantly.

“बॉस, अंदर आ जाओ! भात खायेगा। (want to eat rice)?” he called out, waving like we were old friends separated by fate and tiffin choices.

I nodded, grinning.

**“Yeah. The name pulled me in, Bangali hotel”**

He laughed, a full-belly laugh that echoed off the shaky plastic chairs.

**“Name is old, but food is gold! Sit anywhere—menu’s on the wall!”**

I looked up and there it was: a hand-painted masterpiece that looked like someone’s nephew had made it with leftover Holi colors. It listed classics like *aloo posto*, *fish curry*, *shutki bhuna*—and a mysterious item just labeled “Special Rice (Don’t Ask).” My stomach let out a growl that translated roughly to, “*Yes. To All.*”

Out in front, just beside the big water drum that doubled as a handwash station *and* a mosquito breeding lab, a woman was locked in battle with an army of steel utensils. She scrubbed pots and pans like a seasoned warrior—quick, efficient, and clearly not someone to mess with if you valued your kneecaps.

There was a strange kind of poetry in her movements—scrub, rinse, *clang*, repeat. No drama, no wasted motion. Just the calm determination of someone who’s probably cleaned more plates in one morning than I’ve passed subjects in all semesters.

She didn’t look up once. Not even when a plate slipped and made a noise that could wake the dead. No reaction. Just a slight tilt of the head, as if saying, *“Nice try, plate. Not today.”*

It was clear—this woman wasn’t just washing dishes. She was making sure the next meal arrived on a plate so clean, even the food would hesitate before messing it up.

**“Please, take a seat,”** he said, and before I could even thank him, he whipped out his trusted *gamcha*—that magical multi-purpose towel every Indian man carries like a badge of honour.

With the grace of a stagehand prepping for a VIP, he gave the plastic chair a solid wipe-down, clearing away imaginary dust and any lingering doubts I had.

I sat down and said quietly, **“I’m just looking for a simple meal. Something real.”**

He nodded like a man who had heard this request a thousand times—from students, workers, heartbroken poets, and hungover uncles.

**“You’ve come to the right place,”** he said, as if this were a sacred temple of comfort food.

Then the owner peeked out from behind the curtain, wiping his hands on his own heroic *gamcha*, and announced, **“We have fresh rohu fish from the Ganges, sir. Would you like a piece?”**

“Yes,” I said, without blinking. It wasn’t just a yes—it was a spiritual agreement.

Lunch was about to begin. And I had a feeling it was going to change me.

The meal arrived like a mini Diwali celebration on a plate—minus the fireworks, but definitely with the same level of excitement. There it was: a neat little mountain of rice, a golden pool of steaming dal, a colourful crowd of mixed veggies, and the real showstopper—*aloo bhujia* so perfectly crisp, it could probably star in its own cooking show.

But it was the potatoes that really blew my mind. Tiny golden cubes—each one cut with the kind of precision you’d expect from a surgeon, not a sleepy kitchen at lunchtime. I stared at them, half-hungry, half-impressed, wondering if there was a secret potato-cutting machine hidden in the back... or just one really, really disciplined auntie with a sharp knife and a sharper attitude.

Each bite was like a warm hug from the Annapurna. The rice, the dal, the sabzi—they all came together like old friends at a college reunion, slightly chaotic but deeply comforting. My taste buds, who had been through instant noodles and biscuit dinners for far too long, stood up and applauded.

And then... came the showstopper. The Rohu fish.

It sat there like royalty—tender, golden, glistening with just the right amount of masala. One bite and I nearly dropped the spoon out of pure emotion. It was soft, flavourful, and seasoned so perfectly, I half-expected a violinist to pop up from behind the counter and start playing.

This wasn’t just fish. This was a love letter from the kitchen.

When I finally asked for the bill, the man behind the counter flashed a smile and said, “**Bas saath rupaye—sixty rupees.**”

I blinked.

Sixty? Not one hundred sixty? wow!

Sixty rupees... for a meal that tasted like माँ के हाथ का खाना, grandmother's wisdom, and three decades of perfectly measured spices—all served on a steel plate.

I paid him faster than possible, saying “keep the change,” my wallet lighter, my stomach heavier, and my soul completely satisfied.

As I stepped out into the sun, I felt like I had just discovered a hidden treasure. Not gold or diamonds—but something rarer: good food, made with love, served without attitude, and priced like it was still 1998.

With the grace of a python after a heavy meal, I finally made it back to my flat. The moment I hit the bed, I sank in like a butter in a bread—no thoughts, no movement, just pure horizontal peace. I stretched out dramatically, like I was in a mattress commercial, let the silence wrap around me like a fresh bedsheet, and closed my eyes, fully prepared to snore my way into a food coma.

But of course, sleep had other plans. Instead of dreams, *she* showed up.

Yep—*her*. The girl with those eyes. Those *damn* eyes. The ones that looked like they knew all your secrets and might laugh at them later. We hadn't even spoken properly. Maybe exchanged a glance... or maybe I just stared awkwardly while she ignored me entirely. Hard to say.

Still, there she was, dancing through my brain like it was her personal music video. I hadn't invited the memory, but it came anyway—like a clingy massage from different realm.

And just like that, my mind was wide awake. Because clearly, sleep can wait... but overthinking? That's always on time. And just like that, her image slowly dissolved into the soft fog of sleep—like a scene change in a slow-motion movie. Wrapped in the warmth of that magical lunch, the coziness of my slightly-too-thin mattress, and the oddly romantic memory of a girl I'd barely exchanged

oxygen with, I finally passed out like a well-fed buffalo on a winter afternoon.

After that, when I eventually opened my eyes, the day had already punched out and gone home. The sun had clocked off, and a soft, moody twilight had taken over the room like a gentle fairy tale. Still half-dreaming, half-drooling, I swung my legs off the bed. My feet hit the cold floor, and bam—instant reality check. Sleepy brain, meet chilly cement. It was the universe’s polite way of saying, “*Rise, my child. The world still exists.*”

Running purely on sleep fumes and instinct, I zombie-walked to the basin and splashed some cold water on my face.

Big mistake.

The water hit me like an electricity —sharp, sudden, and deeply personal. I gasped. My brain lit up. The last bits of sleep scattered like first-year students at the sight of a surprise quiz.

Blinking at my half-soggy reflection in the mirror, I had a quiet, noble thought: **“Why not go for a walk?”**

It felt like the right kind of middle-class therapy—cheap, effective, and requiring no subscription. And besides, the idea of a hot cup of tea after a short stroll? That was practically self-care with extra sugar.

So off I went—no destination, no playlist, just vibes and chappals. As I wandered through the familiar lanes, everything felt comfortingly noisy. The air was filled with honking rickshaws that believed in aggressive communication, aunties shouting across balconies like they were in a family-friendly soap opera, and the occasional street dog barking at nothing in particular—probably arguing with ghosts or remembering past life trauma.

And me?

I strolled through it all like a philosophical panda in search of chai and inner peace.



As I reached the Boring Road crossing—still wondering what exactly was boring about it—I glanced to my left and there it was: the mighty orange colour Bajrangbali temple, standing tall like the superhero headquarters.

Its walls were painted in shades so bright, you'd think someone had used a Holi palette and just gone wild. Every inch of it shimmered under the streetlights, like it had dressed up for an evening party. The carvings were so detailed, even the monkeys on the walls looked like they had personality. I paused for a moment, half in awe, half thinking, "*Did they repaint this, or have I just been too sleep-deprived to notice?*"

But just as I was entering the realm of spiritual reflection, reality pulled me back with a delicious punch to the nose.

There it was—my old flame.

A tiny tea-and-samosa stall, slightly tilted, slightly greasy, but still standing like a legend. The kind of place that never advertised but always had loyal fans. And the smell—oh, *the smell*. Fried batter, green chillies, mysterious masalas, and pure joy all mixed together like the opening notes of a song you didn't know you missed.

My stomach let out a growl that could easily be mistaken for emotional applause. And right then, I knew: everything could wait.

But samosa? That was urgent. I ordered the essentials—one steaming cup of chai and one samosa that had caught my eye.

When the plate arrived, I blinked. This was no ordinary samosa. It was *huge*. Practically the size of my palm. Not the usual bite-sized triangle of disappointment—this one looked like it had a gym membership, a personality and may be a full cauliflower in it.

I took a bite. *Crunch*.

The crust was perfectly golden and crispy—like it had trained under some legendary halwai sensei. Inside, the filling was warm, spicy, and so comforting, I briefly considered proposing to it. Each

mouthful felt like a celebration—of potatoes, peas, and all the bad decisions that had led me to this perfect roadside moment.

And the tea? Oh man. That chai wasn't just tea—it was therapy in a kulhad. Hot, fragrant, and strong enough to reboot my entire soul. With every sip, it felt like someone had tucked a blanket around my bones and said, “ससस... सब ठीक है.” (*everything is fine.*)

There I was, sitting on a squeaky plastic stool next to a samosa stand, and somehow, everything felt right with the world and inner peace. As I polished off the last heavenly bite of the samosa, something unexpected happened—nostalgia ambushed me like an old friend jumping out from behind a bush with a photo album.

That warm, spicy flavour didn't just fill my stomach—it time-travelled straight into my soul. Suddenly, I wasn't a tired college guy on Boring Road anymore. I was a snot-nosed, carefree kid back in my dusty hometown, where the biggest life crisis was whose turn it was to bring the cricket ball.

I could almost see the narrow streets again—lined with little shops that sold everything from rubber bands to philosophy, and vendors who called everyone *beta* whether you were four or forty. Our grandest adventures back then? A walk to the market with friends. No phones, no worries, just pockets full of coins and hearts full of nonsense.

And the samosas—oh man, those samosas! We'd crowd around the stall like it was a rock concert, watching them fry golden in hot oil while we argued over who had the best aim with a stone. Each bite was followed by exaggerated gasps of “उफ़फ़.... कितना गरम है!” (too hot) and yet we'd keep going—because burning your tongue was just part of the experience.

And the vendor—ah, *the* samosa uncle.

An old man with more wrinkles than the school principal's forehead and eyes so kind, they made you want to confess even if you hadn't done anything wrong. He had magic in his hands. Literal samosa sorcery. I like to believe I was in his good books—he'd

sometimes sneak in an extra one with a secret nod and a wink, as if saying, “*Go forth, my child. And snack boldly.*”

After stuffing myself with samosas and washing them down with chai that could’ve revived a corpse, I felt an urge to walk it off—or at least look poetic about it. So I strolled into the twilight of Patna, ready to lose myself in its beautifully chaotic mess.

The streets buzzed like a pressure cooker about to whistle. People hurried home with tired legs but cheerful faces, tossing around laughter, chatter, and the occasional battle cry of “*arre aato (auto) ruk bhaiye!*”—the true national anthem of the city.

Vendors, of course, were in full surround-sound mode. Each one shouted like an overconfident auctioneer, offering everything from chaat to eternal happiness. Their golgappa water was advertised like it was the nectar of the gods—though let’s be honest, it could just as easily kill germs as create them.

That’s when I heard it—a sudden burst of laughter that made me stop mid-step.

A small crowd had gathered at a street corner, clapping and smiling like they’d just witnessed something wonderful. And at the centre of it all was a girl—dancing. Not the “trained professional” kind of dance, but the fearless kind. Her feet moved fast, her joy was louder than the traffic, and she seemed gloriously unaware—or unconcerned—that the whole street was watching.

After that matter of discussion should be Patna bike riders: they’ve upgraded to a completely new language when it comes to giving turns. Indicators? Who has the time. Hand signals? Too mainstream. Here, they use the **head tilt**—a subtle move somewhere between a dance step and a casual neck stretch.

Want to turn right? Just tilt your head to the right like you’re checking for a discount at a roadside stall. Left turn? Head tilt to the left, preferably with some bored confidence. No indicator lights. No warning. Just pure desi telepathy.

The person behind has to play psychic every few seconds—constantly reading the rider's neck like it's a live GPS feed. One wrong interpretation, and boom—you're invited to a free somersault workshop. Honestly, it's not driving—it's decoding. And it's strangely poetic. Like traffic, but make it interpretive dance.

At first, I was completely lost—like a tourist trying to understand Morse code made of neck movements. This secret bike language had me baffled. Everyone seemed fluent in it except me.

There was this one glorious moment (terrifying disaster) when I was casually walking along, minding my own business, and *bam!*—I nearly kissed the handlebars of a bike that swerved out of nowhere. The rider had given the sacred head-tilt signal, but me? I thought he just had a stiff neck.

The guy turned around and gave me a look so deadly, I'm pretty sure I aged three years on the spot. His expression screamed, *"This fool wants to die under my bike today."*

That close call was a proper Patna-style wake-up call: if you want to survive the streets here, you don't just walk—you *scan, decode, and dodge*. Because one moment of inattention, and boom—you're the star of the next episode of "Unintentional Street fight."

Moral of the story?

In Patna, every head tilt is a plot twist. **Stay alert... or stay at home.**

As I zigzagged through the chaos of Patna's intersections, I noticed traffic officers stationed at every corner. Big white hats. Stern faces. And... absolutely zero traffic control. Instead of managing cars or signals, they were playing part-time peacemakers, breaking up shouting matches that began when someone's elbow grazed someone else's ego.

Every few steps, there was a fresh soap opera: auto vs. scooty, pedestrian vs. cycle, auto-rickshaw vs. literally everyone. And the

officers? Not traffic police anymore. More like unwilling referees in a high-stakes reality show called *डेली गाली का डोज़* (foul language)

With no real system in place, people moved like contestants in a slow-motion obstacle course. Drivers hesitated, lunged, and swerved as if auditioning for *Fast & Curious: Bihar Drift*.

And in the middle of this beautifully uncoordinated madness, I felt a tug inside my chest. Not gas. Something gentler. Homesickness. A small voice in my head whispered, *Beta, enough adventure... go home.*

So I listened.

I turned back, retracing my steps through neon lights, clanking utensils, roadside quarrels, and the sweet perfume of fried things I couldn't even name. With every step, I felt lighter, like I was slowly peeling off the city's noise and walking toward something softer. Something mine.

By the time I reached my door, destiny was waiting for me—in the form of a glorious night tiffin, sitting loyally outside. On time, as always. Honestly, if this tiffinwala ever ran for mayor, it had my vote.

I bent down to pick it up. The warm metal pressed against my palm like an old friend giving a fist bump. I swear it whispered, *You survived Patna traffic, tilted-head bikers, and existential hunger. Now eat.*

Inside, the room instantly felt calmer. Like slipping into a hoodie that smells faintly of Dettol and dreams—dusty, a little disorganized, but mine.

I placed the tiffin on the table with a solid *thunk*. My stomach immediately stood to attention, buzzing like a fan on low voltage. What's inside today? Something spicy? Something sentimental? Hope was high. Hunger was higher.

With the enthusiasm of a birthday kid, I popped the lid open. And there it was: a humble little feast that looked like it had been

assembled by a loving aunt who didn't believe in calories, only comfort.

First came the chapatis—soft, warm, folded like triangle. Next to them, a proud cauliflower curry sent fragrant puffs of *Eat me now* into the air. Just one whiff and my taste buds broke into applause. Then came the potato fries—golden, cocky, crunchy. No introductions needed. Just seeing them added ten percent happiness to my day.

And finally... the daal. Or as I call it: *Flavoured hot water with commitment issues*. So thin I could practically see my reflection in it. We stared at each other and silently agreed not to expect too much tonight.

The chair creaked in surrender as I plopped down. Across the table, my long-abandoned book gave me a smug little look. Its cover seemed to whisper, *Finally, you snack-hoarding procrastinator*.

And then—perfect harmony. Bite of sabzi here, twist in the plot there. Chapati in one hand, fictional kingdom in the other. Carbs and character development blending into one smooth ride. By the time reality tapped me on the shoulder, my plate was spotless. Licked clean. I had demolished the meal like a polite bulldozer.

After washing up with the grace of a man preparing for either bedtime or battle—I honestly couldn't tell which—I carried my book to bed. My mattress welcomed me like a potato returning to its sack, complete with the dent I had lovingly carved over the years.

The book opened. The words sang. My eyelids grew heavy, flirting with gravity. And just as the plot and digestion synced into a perfect lullaby, the book slid onto my chest like a loyal pet.

Day over. No dramatic farewell. Just soft dreams tiptoeing in, whispering, *Shh... Storytime continues tomorrow*.

**But** days at home stretched on like one long noodle of boredom. Wake up, eat, stare at the ceiling like a philosopher, repeat. Each

day so identical, I half-expected the calendar to give up and just write “etc.” on every page.

Soon enough, I began to crave the madness of college life—the spontaneous bunking, the chai-fuelled debates, the lecture halls that smelled of stress and samosas. Home was great, sure. But predictable peace? That gets old fast.

And then, after a “short” ten-day break that somehow felt like ten months, I was back. Back at those familiar paint-chipped college gates, the ones that creaked like they discover all our secrets.

Technically, I’d started college weeks ago. But according to the mysterious logic of *college admin rules*, this was the *real* beginning.

The actual **Day One**.

No pressure, right? Just pretend the last few weeks were a trailer. This was the movie. I took a deep breath, adjusted my backpack like a soldier about to march into chaos, and stepped through the gates—ready for whatever madness awaited.

Finally, As I strolled toward the college main gate, I noticed a police outpost standing proudly right in front of the entrance—like a watchman who’d taken his job way too seriously and decided never to blink again.

Rumour had it (and by “rumour” I mean the sort of tale, seniors love to whisper to wide-eyed newcomers) that this wasn’t always the case. Apparently, years ago, some goons had done something so horrifying, so unspeakable, that the story had become the college’s unofficial campfire legend. According to the seniors, a young girl had been attacked, and her body left hanging on the very gate I was about to pass through.

The authorities, not wanting the college to feature in the next episode of *India’s Most Wanted*, promptly installed a police station right there. It was their way of saying, “See? Nothing bad will happen now—we’ve got uniformed men with sticks and arms.”

And yet, as I walked closer, I couldn't help but wonder: how much of this tale was cold, hard fact, and how much had been polished, stretched, and seasoned into legend by generations of bored hostelites?

For all I knew, the “hanging at the gate” story could have started with something as mundane as someone's laundry drying on a rope. But then again, this was college—where half the fun was never knowing what was true and what was just a brilliantly told lie. Few even claim they saw the girl's ghost standing at that very gate—in full *Titanic* pose, arms wide, wind in imaginary hair, waiting for her Jack. If that's true, I think the college authorities should stop wasting money on security and just open an **Exorcism cum Counselling Centre** right beside that Naka. At least then, students could get both—**ghost removal and grade improvement—in one visit.**

That grand entrance gate—a structure so majestic it could've doubled as the archway to a royal palace. Its metallic letters gleamed in the sunlight, loudly announcing the college's name, just in case anyone thought they'd wandered into the wrong building and accidentally enrolled in the veterinary hospital next door.

Through the gate stretched a long, straight road, the kind that practically shouted, “*March ahead, young scholar, toward your destiny!*” On one side of this road stood a police station—silent, sturdy, and very good at reminding everyone that campus life was supposed to be fun, but not *too* fun.

On the other side, though, discipline had taken early retirement. What they proudly called a “garden” looked more like Mother Nature's experiment gone wrong. The bushes had overthrown the system, the trees were freelancing in all directions, and the flowers—clearly fed up—had resigned years ago. What remained was a dense jungle that could easily host a *Discovery Channel* episode. Honestly, if Tarzan himself had swung by screaming “Aaaah-aaah!”, nobody would've even blinked—just another day in campus wilderness.



The contrast was hard to miss: a perfectly polished gate, a no-nonsense police station, and a garden that looked like Mother Nature had swallow everything. Together, they created a first impression of the college that was equal parts grand, guarded, and gloriously messy—exactly the kind of stage you’d want for a proper college adventure.

The moment I stepped through the entrance, it felt like I had been dropped straight into the beating heart of college life. The place buzzed with activity—students zipping past in every direction, chattering, laughing, and looking as if they had urgent business, though half of them were probably just hurrying to the canteen to meet someone special.

What struck me most was the fashion parade. Everyone seemed determined to outdo one another in the “who’s-most-original” contest. Some flaunted trendy jeans and flashy sneakers; others looked like they’d just rolled out of bed and declared it a style statement. Together, they painted a picture of individuality so loud that even the trees on campus seemed underdressed.

As I made my way toward my department, I ran straight into every fresher’s worst nightmare—the **senior welcoming committee**, also known as **The Ragging Department of India (unofficial but fully functional)**. They stood there in royal formation, ready to uphold the glorious, centuries-old tradition of “character development through mild humiliation.” It wasn’t violent, but escape was as impossible as skipping attendance in a compulsory lab. So I did what any survival-minded fresher would do—**smiled like a politician, nodded like a bobblehead, and tried my best to look like background furniture.**

It felt a bit like crossing a river full of crocodiles: one wrong splash, and you’d regret ever learning how to walk. Survival meant staying calm, keeping your head low, and praying they’d get bored before you did something stupid. And thus, my official initiation into college life had begun—less like a warm welcome, more like a live-action obstacle course.

Lost in my own swirling thoughts about the intimidating new world I had just entered, I was suddenly yanked back to reality by the arrival of a group of third-year students. At their head marched a figure so commanding that he didn't just walk into the scene—he occupied it entirely. He was a towering six-footer, broad-shouldered and built like someone who had wrestled gym equipment into submission. His body seemed to consume more space than physics would normally allow, as if the air itself had politely moved aside to accommodate him.

His skin had that deep, earthy glow of someone who could photosynthesize if given enough sunlight, and his hair—good Lord—seemed to have launched an expansion project of its own. It was everywhere: arms, chest, neck... probably even filing a request to colonize undisclosed regions. He didn't look like a college student; he looked like evolution's half-finished prototype that escaped the lab before the "civilized human" update was installed.

There was something undeniably primal about him, like he'd been personally trained by the wolves of Gaya. He radiated the kind of raw, prehistoric energy that made you wonder if he opened coconuts with his teeth. It was impressive, sure—but also mildly terrifying, like sitting next to a friendly gorilla who just realized he enjoys hostel dal-chawal.

In that instant, my mind flashed back to the old horror film *Jaani-Dushman*. The figure looming in front of me could've been the creature's long-lost cousin, freshly escaped from the film reel. He had the look of an early man—massive, intimidating, and perfectly capable of swallowing a small girl in a single gulp, without even needing a glass of water to wash her down.

His body was a monument to excess strength; I pegged him at no less than 120 kilos, and that was being polite. To make matters worse, his arms carried more hair than a family of Persian cats combined. If evolution was a competition, this man had clearly taken a detour and signed up for the "extra hair package."

But it wasn't just his physique that made him terrifying—it was his presence. He radiated an unmistakable arrogance, the kind that clung to him like an expensive cologne. You could tell he had grown up spoiled, the sort of son whose wealthy father had probably paid off every consequence life ever tried to hand him. Rules, boundaries, basic human humility—none of these had made it past the doorman of his privileged upbringing.

The result was a towering, overconfident figure who seemed less like a senior student and more like a bouncer. Standing before him felt like stumbling into a horror movie cameo—except this time, I wasn't watching safely from a theatre seat.

"The moment his eyes met mine, I knew resistance was pointless. With just a crook of his finger, he summoned me over like a street punk calling for company." I shuffled forward and planted myself in front of him, my posture somewhere between military attention and scared-little-puppy.

"Put your bag down," he commanded.

I obeyed instantly, as if the bag had suddenly become radioactive.

Then came the dreaded, traditional question—the one every fresher hears on Day One.

"Are you a fresher?"

"Yes," I replied, trying to sound casual, though my voice squeaked like a rusty door hinge.

A slow grin spread across his face, the kind that spelled trouble in bold letters. "Good," he said, leaning back with the smugness of a man who had just invented ragging. "Now, go ask that girl in the blue shirt what her bra size is."

For a second, I froze. My brain, usually sluggish on most occasions, suddenly lit up like Diwali fireworks. Every neuron screamed the same message: *This is a trap. A trap designed by the devil himself.*

It was at that precise moment I realized college wasn't going to be about books and classrooms—it was going to be about surviving situations like this with my dignity (and possibly my life) intact.

At that moment, I became utterly convinced that this man was not just primitive in appearance but also proudly bankrupt in the department of brains. In fact, I had a sneaking suspicion that even the cavemen who once painted on cave walls and discovered fire probably had a higher IQ score. Darwin, I thought, would have been horrified—here was living proof that evolution had gotten tired halfway through and simply left the job unfinished. The man wasn't a student; he was a full-time Neanderthal, moonlighting as a third-year.

It was a depressing realization, and I felt frustration bubbling inside me. Still, I decided to give him one last chance, if only for the sake of my own survival. I needed to make him see that his “instructions” weren't just idiotic—they were hazardous. After all, what if his bright idea landed me with broken bones? Did I look like I had spare ribs to donate?

So, summoning all the courage I had (which, admittedly, wasn't much), I resolved to reason with him one final time. Perhaps, by some miracle, a neuron would spark to life in his prehistoric skull, and he might understand that ragging was bad not just for my dignity, but also for my skeletal system.

“Sir,” I tried, summoning my politest, most pleading tone, “if I ask her that, she'll slap me—and then I'll probably get expelled from college.”

The prehistoric creature didn't even let me finish. “Oh-ho! Talking back, are we?” he barked, as if I'd just insulted his entire species.

I went silent immediately. Sometimes silence isn't golden—it's just safer.

He leaned in, his voice dropping into a mock-threatening growl. “Listen carefully. If you don’t follow our orders, you won’t be allowed to study here. You have two options: either get slapped, or quit college.”

What a choice. A free slap, or a free ticket out of education. I stood there, calculating like a mathematician with a death wish. Whichever way I turned, I was doomed. The ragging wasn’t going to stop—this was just the opening act of a very long play.

In my head, the worst-case scenario played itself out in high-definition: I’d walk up to the girl, stammer out his ridiculous request, and she’d slap me hard enough to rearrange my jawline. My cheek would burn, my pride would crumble, and my grand college journey would begin with a handprint as its logo.

Still, I reasoned, in the strange hierarchy of college life, maybe it wouldn’t be the end of the world. She was a senior, I was a helpless fresher; it might just get brushed off as “one of those moments.” A little drama, a little humiliation—nothing permanent, except perhaps the dent in my dignity. And so, standing there before this self-proclaimed Caveman, I felt that peculiar mix of dread and resignation every fresher learns on Day One: no matter what choice you make, you’re doomed anyway.

Steeling myself or what I was convinced would be the slap of the century, I inhaled deeply and began the slow, dreadful march toward the girl in the blue shirt. My heart pounded so loudly I was fairly certain the entire campus could hear it, and my brain was running through possible outcomes like a worst-case-scenario generator on overdrive.

Would this cost me my dignity? Almost definitely.

Would I ever recover from the embarrassment? Highly unlikely.

Would my future grandchildren still laugh about this story? Absolutely.

The nearer I got, the heavier the air felt. That group of girls had already spotted me, and their collective stare had the intensity of a high-powered microscope. I suddenly felt like an insect about to be pinned down for display. Each one of them looked ready to pass judgment, and I could practically hear the silent verdict: "*Fresher the loser.*"

Still, there was no turning back. With a strange mix of dread and borrowed courage, I stopped behind her. My throat was dry, but I somehow managed to croak, "Excuse me... I have a question for you."

I tried to sound sincere, as if I were about to ask for directions to the library, and not—as per orders from a Caveman overlord—something that could earn me a stinging handprint across my cheek. Inside, I braced myself. Every step had felt like a leap into the abyss, and now I was standing at the very edge. The only question left was: would I fall... or would I simply get slapped into next week?

Just as she turned to face me, I froze in sheer disbelief. Of all people, it had to be her—Lavanayamayi. Full name R. Lavanayamayi. Something.....something...

The very same girl I'd stumbled across on my first day of college, when everything felt like a strange mix of excitement, confusion, and mild existential panic. Our eyes met, and for a moment, the chaos around me simply melted away. A rush of recognition hit me so hard it was almost cinematic—the kind of slow-motion flashback you see in movies.

She smiled, and not just any smile. It was the kind of radiant, room-lighting smile that could make even the crankiest exam invigilator reconsider his career choices. Instantly, my nerves loosened, and the tension of the absurd situation I was in shrank just a little. In that single moment, it felt as though time had folded neatly in half, bringing me right back to that first encounter—when everything was new, terrifying, and yet strangely wonderful. And now, here she was again, not just a memory, but very much real, smiling at me like I hadn't just been ordered by a prehistoric bully to commit social suicide.

At that moment, I was trapped in a very real dilemma. Part of me wanted to be brave, face the situation head-on, and risk whatever humiliation was waiting. The other part—arguably the smarter part—was already whispering, “*Just turn around, go home, and tell everyone college got demolish by government.*”

I actually considered it. One neat about-face, a brisk walk out the gate, and I’d be free. But before I could execute my heroic escape plan, I caught the look in Lavanayamayī’s eyes. She had clearly picked up on my growing discomfort. My gaze darted nervously between her calm, curious face and the pack of troublemakers looming behind me, practically salivating for drama. Back and forth my eyes went, like a shuttlecock in a badminton match—except I was the one getting smashed.

And then the impossible question loomed over me. How in the world was I supposed to say it out loud? How could I possibly look at this radiant, smiling girl and ask her *that* ridiculous question—the one guaranteed to destroy any chance of me ever being taken seriously again?

It felt less like a conversation and more like a suicide mission. I had just about made up my mind to abandon ship and head home when she tilted her head, clearly sensing something was off.

“Are they ragging you?” she asked gently.

I gave a reluctant nod, feeling like a schoolboy caught sneaking porn magazine.

“And what exactly did they ask you to do?” she pressed.

I froze. How was I supposed to confess *that*? My throat tightened, and after a long pause I muttered, barely above a whisper, “I... I can’t say it out loud.”

She broke into a knowing smile, the kind seniors wear when they’ve seen this drama unfold a hundred times before. “Let me guess—they told you to ask for my lingerie size, didn’t they?”

My eyes dropped instantly to the ground, as if the gravel beneath my feet had suddenly become fascinating. “H-how did you know?” I stammered.

She laughed, a clear, ringing laugh that instantly made the whole situation feel less terrifying. “Because I know their tricks. They’ve been running the same tired playbook for years. Old sinners, every one of them.”

Then she leaned a little closer and said with a mischievous grin, “Just go back and tell them ‘thirty.’ That should keep them quiet.”

Her words hit me like a bolt of lightning, and humiliation flooded through me in an instant. My face turned a fiery shade of red, and I could feel the heat crawling up to my ears, practically announcing my embarrassment to the world. My jaw dropped open in disbelief, as if my brain had temporarily disconnected from the rest of my body.

Noticing my stunned expression, she leaned in ever so slightly, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Careful,” she teased, “if you keep your mouth open like that and a fly might decide to move in.”

She ended her remark with a cheeky grin, the kind that could light up an entire room—and possibly fry whatever was left of my already overheated nerves.

I managed a stiff nod, swallowing the lump that had lodged itself in my throat. At that moment, I wasn’t just embarrassed; I was stuck in a full-blown quandary, torn between the urge to vanish into thin air and the ridiculous mission still waiting for me with the Caveman squad.

The campus looked the same as I walked back, but I didn’t. The earlier unease still clung to me like an unwanted shadow, reminding me of the bizarre confrontation I’d just survived.

When I rejoined that wild crew of tormentors, the first thing I noticed was the look on the brute’s face. Astonishment was written all over it, as clear as graffiti on a white wall. He had clearly been



expecting a slap—preferably a loud, humiliating one—that would have sealed my fate and given him a story to brag about for weeks.

But since that didn't happen, I could practically see the gears in his prehistoric brain grinding to a halt. His carefully crafted plan had collapsed faster than a house of cards in a storm. The swagger on his face drained away, replaced with the sulky disappointment of a child whose ice cream had just been snatched by a passing crow.

Watching him stew in that realization, I almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

Breaking the silence, I said it as calmly as I could manage: "Thirty."

The word floated between us like a smoke bomb, leaving everyone blinking in confusion. The brute's eyes narrowed immediately. His thick forehead creased so deeply, you could've planted seeds in the furrows.

"Do you know her from before?" he demanded, his tone sharp, as if he were auditioning for the role of a CID inspector.

I locked eyes with him, forced my voice steady, and lied with all the confidence of a politician on election day. "No."

That was it. No explanation. No follow-up. Just "No."

Then, without giving his brain a chance to buffer, I grabbed my bag and made a dramatic exit toward the stairs. Behind me, I could almost *feel* his disappointment melting into pure frustration. If I'd turned around, I half expected to see him stomping his feet or pulling his hair like a Caveman whose dinner had just run off into the jungle.

Each step I climbed felt like a mini victory parade—arms loaded with books, ego slightly bruised, but heart doing a bhangra. After all, I'd just survived my first round of college ragging... and left that Neanderthal below, probably still wondering how his "scare tactics" turned into my grand exit scene.

## CHAPTER 3

# Japani Oil

Something truly unexpected had happened at our college—no, not free samosas in the canteen but something *bigger*. A high-powered delegation from Japan had landed in Patna. Yes, *Japan*. The land of bullet trains, robots that can do your laundry, and vending machines that sell everything from noodles to lingerie.

They didn't just show up for the tea and biscuits (though, let's be honest, our chai *is* pretty legendary). No, this was part of a grand plan—an international brainwave to upgrade our computer science department from its current "somewhat dusty Windows 98 lab" status to something out of a tech documentary.

There they were—suited, serious, and polite to a level that made even our most disciplined professors look like stand-up comedians. Their visit wasn't just for photo ops and polite head nods. They were here to build bridges. Not literal ones (that's the civil department's headache), but academic bridges—think research exchanges, shiny new infrastructure, and possibly a future where our college cyber doesn't drop every time someone sneezes.

And why Japan, you ask? Well, they kind of wrote the book on computer science and artificial intelligence. Literally. If anyone knows how to turn wires and codes into magic, it's them.

So yes, the arrival of these calm, bowing, tech-genius samurais of academia signalled something important: change is coming. Big change. Possibly with artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and—dare we dream?—working projectors in every classroom.

And us? We're just hoping we don't accidentally insult anyone with our activities.

To save face and avoid any unexpected "*desi chaos meets foreign delegation*" situations, our college administration—usually more reactive than proactive—pulled off a rare masterstroke: they declared a surprise holiday for all students. Why? Because some Japanese dignitaries were visiting, and apparently, the admin didn't want them mistaking our regular college madness for a scene from a post-apocalyptic movie.

Now, this would've been a great plan—except nobody told **us, as we bunked**. Oblivious to the secret holiday, we strolled into college like it was just another day on the timetable. Backpacks slung, jokes flying, and a full supply of bad hostel tea sloshing in our stomachs, we arrived ready for classes, crush-spotting, and possibly a surprise test or two.

What we got instead... was silence. Creepy, unnatural silence. No chaiwala shouting, no seniors plotting conspiracy under the banyan tree, not even a single crow trying to steal someone's samosa.

It was like we'd walked into a parallel universe—same campus, but all the life had been vacuumed out. Unbeknownst to us, the administration had masterfully turned our usually chaotic college into a Zen garden of calm, hoping to impress the visiting Japanese guests with some mythical peace and discipline we definitely didn't possess.

And there we were—few confused students, standing in the middle of a ghost town, completely unaware that the rest of the college had been sent off so our antics wouldn't accidentally launch an international incident.

Just as we were wondering if we'd accidentally stumbled into an abandoned movie set, a staff member emerged like a background character suddenly handed a line. With the seriousness of someone announcing a national emergency, he informed us: "All classes are cancelled for today. Kindly go home."

Go home?

After dragging ourselves out of bed, surviving the auto-rikshaw ride from hell, and mentally preparing for a long day of lectures (and maybe a nap in the middle row)? This was *not* the plot twist we were hoping for.

Apparently, some “very important foreign guests” were visiting, and the college had been sanitized of all student activity to avoid any... *spontaneous cultural demonstrations*, if you know what I mean. The kind that involve bunking, badminton in the corridors, and students yelling things like "ओए मुठ्ठल, असाइनमेंट भेज!" (“Hey idiot (in other way), send the assignment!”) across the quad.

We nodded politely, even faked a regretful sigh or two, and pretended to head for the gate. But as we reached the exit, something stopped us.

A thought.

A spark.

An entirely ill-advised idea.

**This was our moment.** When would we *ever* get this close to international guests again? People who probably ate sushi without ketchup, bowed instead of waving, and might even think our college canteen was “exotic.” This wasn’t just a random Wednesday—it was an open window into a world beyond our mess food and mid-sems.

So, after a dramatic group huddle worthy of a cricket match, we made our decision.

**We were not going home.**

No, sir. We were staying. Because this was more than a holiday. This was a rare, golden chance to interact, to learn, to possibly become accidental ambassadors of our campus culture (God help them). And who knew? Maybe we’d even get a selfie with someone who knew **origami**.

With that rebellious thrill in our hearts and absolutely no plan in our heads, we turned back, ready to chase destiny—or at least figure out where the Japanese guests were having tea.

No sooner had we tiptoed our way back into campus (like undercover agents with zero stealth training) than our eyes locked onto a curious little group—six or seven people who quite clearly didn't belong to the regular chaos of our college scene. They stood out like neon signs in a power-cut.

For starters, their skin had this unusual golden-yellow glow, almost like they'd just finished bathing in 'Turmeric' before showing up. Not in a bad way—more like they'd been gently painted by an artist with a turmeric fetish. It was oddly mesmerizing, like watching a documentary on "Rare and Beautiful Species in Their Natural Habitat."

One look, and we knew: **these were The Visitors.** The ones we'd technically been asked to stay far, far away from.

But curiosity, as always, steamrolled caution.

Who were they?

Why were they here?

What did they eat for lunch?

And most importantly, would they think we were also part of the official welcoming committee if we just stood nearby and smiled professionally?

The mystery of their golden glow only added to the suspense. It wasn't just a different skin tone—it was like the universe had dipped them in a filter named *'Premium Guest Mode'*.

We didn't know where they were from, or why fate had flung them into our sleepy college on this random Wednesday, but one thing was certain: we *had* to get closer.

And ideally, without getting thrown out in the process.

Raju squinted at the group and muttered under his breath, “Bro... are they all down with jaundice or what?”

Before any of us could even chuckle, Malik smacked him (mentally, not physically... this time) and said, “No, you donkey head! That’s just how their skin looks!”

And just like that—somewhere between Raju’s medical diagnosis and Malik’s frustration—I had a full-blown epiphany.

See, up until that point in life, my understanding of how people looked was embarrassingly basic. In my head, the world was divided into two types of people: dark-skinned and light-skinned. Maybe a few shades in between for variety, like tea with more milk or less milk.

But that day, standing there with my jaw slightly ajar and my brain slowly rebooting, I realized something monumental: **there was a whole other skin tone I had never really considered—yellowish.** Not like cartoonish banana-yellow, but a subtle, golden warmth, like sunlight filtered through turmeric.

It was wild. Eye-opening. A full-blown National Geographic moment in the middle of our sleepy college.

For the first time, I truly saw that the human race wasn’t just a two-colour crayon box. It was a full-blown 64-shade pack, with shades I hadn’t even known existed. And suddenly, I felt both ridiculously undereducated... and wildly curious.

What else had I missed about the world?

What other kinds of people were out there?

What languages did they speak?

What food did they eat?

Did they also think hostel food tasted like cardboard?

It wasn’t just a lesson in appearances. It was a tiny, quiet identity earthquake. A moment that nudged me out of my comfort zone and into a much bigger, brighter, more diverse world.

And all thanks to a possibly offensive joke, a sharp correction, and a group of dignified strangers glowing like soft-focus yellow sky lamps.

The moment their eyes met ours, something magical happened.

They bowed.

Not dramatically, not like in the movies—just a gentle forward tilt, like a polite nod with extra elegance. It was subtle, graceful, and oozed respect. Honestly, it made our usual “ओए, क्या हाल है?” (“Hey, what’s up?”)

Instinctively, we returned the gesture. A little awkwardly, sure—our version looked more like we were checking if our shoelaces were still tied—but we meant well. And in that silent little bow-exchange, something clicked. Warmth passed between us. Smiles were exchanged. We were basking in this peaceful cultural handshake when... disaster struck.

From the shadows of his lair—sorry, his office—our Principal had been watching. Probably via those dusty old CCTV cameras we’d assumed were just decorative. And let’s just say, **he did not approve of our little moment of international diplomacy.**

Within seconds, his face appeared on one of the nearby monitors like a villain in a low-budget spy movie. Stern. Grim. Unblinking. His expression said: “What fresh nonsense is this?”

Then came The Summon.

A peon appeared out of nowhere, puffing like he’d run a marathon through bureaucratic corridors and gasped, “Principal Sir wants to meet you. All of you. Now.”

Hush! Just like that, our cultural bonding session was over.

And so, off we went—like naughty schoolkids headed straight to the lion’s den. Or as we fondly called it: **“The Chamber of Chu...”**

We never actually finished the sentence out loud—no one dared—but everyone knew what the ‘Chu’ stood for. The legend lived in whispers, carved into the walls of hostel rooms and etched in the collective trauma of generations past.

As we trudged toward our fate, heads slightly bowed (this time in doom, not respect), one thing was clear: our spontaneous peace summit had turned into an international incident—at least in the eyes of the administration.

The four of us boys, along with three girls from our class (who instantly started whispering "I told you this would happen"), marched into the Principal's office like condemned warriors walking into the Roman Colosseum—except with less armour and more sweaty palms.

The door let out a long, dramatic creak as it shut behind us, like even the hinges knew something serious was about to go down.

There he was.

### **The Principal.**

The Man. The Myth. The Migraine.

Seated at his desk like an ancient high priest of discipline, he looked up slowly, adjusting his eternally crooked glasses—just enough to let them rest on the absolute tip of his nose, defying gravity and all architectural logic.

He didn't speak at first.

Just stared. One by one, his eyes scanned us like a security guard looking at shoplifters on a grainy CCTV feed. We shuffled awkwardly under his laser-gaze, some of us pretending to examine the bookshelf, the ceiling fan, or our own shoes—anything to avoid eye contact.

Then, with the dramatic flair of a villain before delivering his evil monologue, he cleared his throat.

What followed was not a speech. It was a **verbal guillotine**.



Each word sliced through the silence. No yelling. No theatrics. Just that calm, calculated tone that somehow felt a hundred times scarier.

“You were instructed to stay away. You were *told*. Yet you chose to insert yourselves into an event that did not concern you. Tell me—do you think this college is a picnic spot?”

(We wanted to say yes, but this clearly wasn’t the moment.)

He went on, each sentence stacking on the next like bricks in the wall of our upcoming punishment. And though we tried to stand straight, nod politely, and act like future CEOs in the making, inside, we were all screaming: *We just bowed and smiled! How did this turn into a national emergency?!*

By the time he finished, we’d stopped breathing through our noses. We didn’t know what exactly was going to happen—detention, suspension, a heartfelt letter to our parents—but one thing was crystal clear: **This was not going to blow over.**

This wasn’t just a “moment” in our day. Oh no. This was the kind of incident that would echo through the hostel walls for semesters to come. A tale that would start with, “*Remember the time we got summoned for bowing at the guests?*”

And right there, in that stiff, over-air-conditioned room with creaky furniture and dusty trophies, our fate was being written.

Possibly in all red caps.

The Principal, in all his calm fury, gave us two options. And he didn’t even blink when he said it.

“So... are you all going home now? Or should I arrange for your **Transfer Certificates** to be ready by tomorrow morning?”

Ah yes, the classic “*get out or get out permanently*” speech.

We huddled like war generals planning a retreat and quickly agreed: yeah, maybe it was best to just go home now—while we still had homes *and* admissions. But as every friend group knows, there’s

always **that** bunch—the ones powered by chaos, cocaine and bad ideas.

Just as we were about to make a graceful exit and maybe cry silently on the way back to our hostels, someone said, “Oye... what if we don’t go home?”

We froze.

“What if,” he continued, eyes glinting with the same energy as a cat on caffeine, “we check out that half-finished building behind the basketball court? You know, the one that looks like it’s been abandoned since dinosaurs roamed the Earth?”

Suddenly, the fear of expulsion was replaced by the thrill of adventure. We could practically hear the music of a heist movie starting in the background. Who needed boring old ‘home’ when there were unfinished buildings and possible ghosts to explore?

We imagined rusty staircases, echoing corridors, maybe even secret passages—or at least a half-eaten sandwich left by a ‘witch’ that could pass for archaeological evidence.

It was illegal (probably), risky (definitely), and **completely unnecessary**. Which is exactly why we had to do it.

The temptation of the forbidden zone behind the basketball court was just too strong. And let’s be honest—after narrowly dodging a full-blown expulsion, what better way to unwind than by *possibly getting caught again*?

And so, like the complete idiots we were proud to be, we ditched the exit route and marched toward the half-constructed temple of mystery, eyes shining with mischief, hearts pounding with excitement...

...and absolutely no idea what we were getting ourselves into.

Tucked away in a quiet little corner behind the half-built structure, something magical happened. The tension from earlier? Gone. The threat of expulsion? Forgotten. All that remained was **pure, unfiltered joy**.

We'd found ourselves the perfect hideout—part construction site, part secret clubhouse—and within minutes, the place was echoing with the kind of laughter that makes your stomach hurt.

Sheetesh and I had perched ourselves on a low boundary wall, which immediately became our unofficial comedy stage. As usual, we slipped into our favourite genre: **wild, wonderfully inappropriate jokes**. You know, the kind you wouldn't dare say in front of parents, teachers, or any living adult with a shred of decency.

And just as we hit our stride with a particularly bold joke involving a lion, a donkey, and a situation that definitely doesn't exist in nature...

**Sohan walked in.**

Yes, **Sohan**—the quiet guy. The overthinker. His face like old Godrej fridge. The one who usually sat at a polite distance from our nonsense, probably making mental notes about how we'd all end up in jail someday. We all stared, mid-chuckle, expecting him to roll his eyes and walk away like usual.

But instead, he **grinned**. And then—miracle of miracles—he laughed. A full, hearty, throw-your-head-back laugh. It hit us like a plot twist. Sohan had joined the madness.

What followed was beautiful chaos. The jokes got worse. The laughter got louder. At one point, someone fell off the wall and someone else laughed so hard they started hiccupping like a drunk goat.

That silly, spontaneous, off-limits gathering behind a dusty building turned into one of those rare college moments you never forget—not because it was planned, but because it **wasn't**.

And in that mess of dusty clothes, terrible jokes, and unexpectedly united laughter, we weren't just a bunch of students hiding from a principal anymore.

We were friends. Real ones. And that made all the difference.

The jokes were flying, the laughter was loud, and the vibe was so good it could've been bottled and sold as an energy drink. We were high on friendship, freedom, and really bad punchlines.

And then—**Sohan happened.**

In a rare burst of mischief (clearly inspired by our corrupting influence), he grinned, leaned over, and gave me a playful nudge on the shoulder.

**Just a friendly tap.**

Except... we were sitting on the **edge of the third floor.**

So, you know... *physics.*

In a flash, the world spun sideways. My balance said goodbye, and gravity, ever the opportunist, said, "I'll take it from here."

Down I went.

**Third floor to second floor:** I hit a narrow concrete ledge like a cartoon character, ribs rattling, limbs flailing, brain screaming.

**Second floor to first:** I rolled off the edge and landed awkwardly on a dusty old window sill, clinging to it for a brief, shining second like some bargain-bin action hero.

Then... nope.

Off again.

**First floor to ground:** I hit the earth like a sack of confused potatoes. It was dramatic. It was dusty. It was loud.

I lay there blinking up at the sky, doing the mental math on how many bones I might have broken, when—

**WHACK.**

A loose brick from above decided to join the party and slammed me right in the face, just to add that final "full stop" to this sentence of suffering.

And that... that's when the lights went out.

## **Total blackout.**

No credits. No music. Just me, lying in a pile of dirt and regret, wondering if this was the universe's way of saying, "*Maybe stick to indoor jokes next time.*"

I don't know what waking up from death is *supposed* to feel like, but I can confirm this: it starts with a very wet face and a very confused brain. Tiny splashes of water hit me one after the other, like someone was baptizing me with a leaky bottle. My eyes fluttered open, and the first thing I saw was **a circle of faces**—wide-eyed, ghost-pale, and looking at me like I was either a holy miracle or a fresh corpse that had suddenly decided to blink.

Turns out, it was just my friends. They were all crouched around me like detectives at a crime scene, except these detectives were in full-blown **panic mode**.

Someone was whispering "He's alive... I think?"

Someone else was saying "Check his pulse again!"

One guy was holding my foot like it might tell him something. And then there were the girls.

Oh boy. They were already in **mourning mode**—eyes red, mascara smudged, whispering emotional goodbyes like I'd just flatlined in a soap opera.

One of them was crying so hard she could've been cast as "Weeping Civilian #1" in a disaster movie. Another was mumbling something about. It was chaos, drama, and a little touching, honestly.

And there I was—still flat on the ground, brick-kissed and dignity-free—trying to piece together what happened. My head throbbed like a marching band had held practice inside it, and my body felt like it had been lightly tenderized for cooking.

But I was awake.

And very, very **not dead**.

I wanted to sit up, say something heroic—something cool like, “Did anyone get the license plate of that brick?” But all I could manage was a faint grunt and a tiny thumbs-up, like a half-baked Terminator.

Still, that was enough.

Gasps turned into laughter, sobs turned into sighs of relief, and I was instantly promoted from *"tragic idiot who fell three floors"* to *"legendary idiot who survived it."*

I could already feel the story forming: **"The Boy Who Fell and Lived."**

And if nothing else, I'd just earned myself **lifetime bragging rights**—and maybe a tetanus shot.

As my blurry vision adjusted to the chaos around me, something—or rather, **someone**—caught my eye.

There she was.

A young woman with skin so golden and lit from within by a soft-focus spotlight. Compared to the sweaty, dusty gang of half-panicked students around me, she looked... **divine**.

Calm, graceful, and moving as if she were walking through a slow-motion shampoo commercial, she made her way toward me. No flailing. No screaming. Just that peaceful determination, like she knew exactly what she was doing—even though I had just plummeted three floors and possibly died twice on the way down.

She reached my side, knelt gently, and—without warning—pressed her ear to my chest.

Now, if this had been a movie, this is the part where romantic music would start playing. But in reality, all I could think was: *"Okay, either she's checking if I'm alive... or listening for a sound of vending machine inside me."*

Everyone else held their breath.

She didn't flinch. Didn't panic. Just listened. Then, slowly, she sat up like amine character. Turned to the crowd. And with a small, knowing smile that could probably calm wild animals, she said, "He's alive."

**Cue the crowd going absolutely hopeful.**

Some cheer, Some sobbed again. One guy literally dropped to his knees like we were in a sports movie. For a brief, shining moment, I was a national hero. And the golden girl? She just nodded, like reviving people from near-death was all in a day's work. Honestly, if I hadn't been half-conscious and slightly concussed, I might've proposed right then and there.

And then—just when I thought my dignity had hit rock bottom—it dug a little deeper. The golden-skinned girl, the calm angel from the East, leaned down again. But this time... she didn't go for my chest.

Nope.

Straight for the mouth.

She tilted my head, checked my breath, and before anyone could say "*Wait, what's happening?*"—hush—mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

I was half unconscious, mind you, but even in that dazed limbo, part of my brain went: "*Whoa, plot twist.*"

Around us, my friends stood frozen like extras in a soap opera freeze-frame—wide-eyed, jaws on the floor, logic out the window.

Raju whispered, "Bro... is he... is he getting kissed by a Japanese girl?"

Malik, stunned: "Either that, or we are in a very weird dream sequence."

None of them understood the gravity of what was happening. To them, this wasn't CPR. This was fate handing me a bizarre,

international love story—complete with subtitles and background score.

But oh, the confusion. The cocktail of horror, awe, and envy on their faces was priceless. One guy looked like he wanted to faint *on my behalf*.

And yet, hidden somewhere under all that slapstick chaos, was actual human emotion—yeah, shocking, I know. The jokes were flying faster than the ambulance should’ve, but behind all the laughter, I could see it in their eyes: they weren’t watching a rom-com moment... they were watching their half-dead buddy audition for *Final Desires: Hostel Edition*.

Even in the madness, they cared.

Still, if there was ever a moment that deserved the caption “*You had to be there*,” this was it.

Picture this: A half-conscious me lying like a discounted extra from *Kabhi Haan Kabhi Na*.

An angel doing CPR like it was a yoga demo.

And a crowd of college students convinced they were witnessing the trailer of the strangest Bollywood–Japanese crossover ever made.

I survived. But oh boy, so did the legend—now featuring popcorn, jokes, and a lifetime of teasing.

The Japanese guests, bless their orderly souls, looked like they had just witnessed a Marvel-level stunt in real life. Their eyes were stretched wide, their jaws hanging so low you could’ve served sushi on them. One of them even adjusted his glasses twice—as if a second look might make what he just saw *less ridiculous*.

I mean, fair enough. I had just fallen three stories, cartwheeled off ledges like an amateur stunt double, kissed the Earth like a long-lost lover, and still somehow had a pulse. Even I wasn’t sure how I was alive.



But the real show-stealer was the young Japanese girl who had heroically saved me. She stared at me as if I were some glitch in the Matrix. Her face said: *"This boy is either blessed by the gods... or made of rubber."*

Honestly, I didn't blame her. I felt like I should be glowing or levitating or something, just to match the awe on their faces. But just as I was starting to feel like a slightly battered, slightly heroic miracle... but suddenly my eyes locked onto someone else.

### **The principal.**

There he stood—arms crossed, face carved out of stone, eyes squinting like a judge at the climax of a courtroom drama. And just like that, all the awe and applause and semi-romantic resuscitation went poof.

A cold wave of dread slammed into me like a second fall. If death had come to collect me right then, I might've said, *"Yeah bro, let's go. I've had enough excitement for one day."*

Because whatever awaited me in his office tomorrow... oh, it would make Hitler look gentle.

You see, a miracle might impress the Japanese, but to the principal?

It was just one more reason to increase the punishment.

And as I lay there blinking up at the sky, with a sore back, a bruised ego, and the scent of antiseptic still clinging to my lips, one terrible truth echoed in my brain:

**Surviving the fall was easy. Surviving next day? That would take an even greater miracle.**

To my absolute shock—and I mean *jaw-on-the-floor* shock—the principal didn't yell. He didn't scold. He didn't even raise a threatening eyebrow. Instead, he looked... worried. Like, *genuinely concerned*. The man who once issued punishments for chewing gum during class now spoke to me as gently as a worried uncle.

He calmly said, “Don’t worry. We’re calling an ambulance. You need to be taken to the hospital immediately.”

Wait—what? No lecture? No “What were you hooligans doing on the third floor in the first place?” Just compassion?

Was this a dream? Had I died and entered a parallel universe where principals were... *nice*?

Meanwhile, my friends sprang into full-blown drama-level panic mode.

Raju, always the drama king in our group, threw his hands up and declared, “Ambulance?! At this rate, they’ll arrive in time for his *funeral*! We’re not waiting!”

Before anyone could argue, he spun toward Nisha and pointed at her scooter like a general pointing at a war tank.

“Give us the keys! Kurji Hospital is only fifteen minutes away from her, if we go full throttle—and I *will* go full throttle!”

Sir, still holding it together impressively well, quickly opened his wallet and handed Raju about five or six thousand rupees with the speed of a man tipping a delivery guy in an emergency.

“Take this,” he said firmly. “Get everything done. Medicine, doctor, scan—whatever is needed. If more’s needed, call me. I’ll send it. I just... I can’t come with you. The Japanese delegates—you see”

And just like that, the situation became part rescue mission, part *Fast & Furious: Kurji Drift*.

And then it hit me—*like a lightning bolt to the brain*—I knew exactly what I had to do.

I had to play half dead, half conscious.

Well... maybe not dead-dead. Just unconscious. Deep, dramatic, Bollywood-style unconscious. The kind where you lie still, eyes closed, one arm flopped out like a Shakespearean hero mid-tragedy.

You see, there were two *massive* perks to this masterstroke of deception. First, the financial possibilities. Sympathy money. Emergency donations. Maybe even a college-sponsored fruit basket or two! If we played our cards right, this "tragedy" could come with a decent payday. Second—and far more important—I'd be untouchable. You can't scold a boy who's lying motionless like a wounded soldier on a battlefield.

So I lay there, still as a statue, hoping to stretch this Oscar-worthy performance long enough to avoid the inevitable scolding and buy us some time to regroup. Maybe, just maybe, we could spin this chaos into something useful... or at least less disastrous.

And thus began the greatest fake blackout in the history of my life.

In a truly heroic act of ignoring all common sense—and my physical well-being—my friends swooped in with the kind of excitement usually reserved for winning the lottery. Before I could say a word, they had grabbed me and were marching me toward the scooter like I was some sort of fallen war hero. A very confused, slightly injured war hero.

Now, normally, when someone gets hurt, you'd expect a bit of tenderness. Maybe a stretcher. A concerned "Are you okay, bro?" Or at the very least, someone pretending to know first aid. But no. My friends had other plans. Big, chaotic, completely unlicensed plans.

They built their own version of a human stretcher on the spot. And by "stretcher," I mean they each grabbed a limb of mine and started walking. That's it. No balance, no coordination—just four overexcited maniacs carrying me like they were delivering a sofa they'd found on the riverside.

It was bumpy. It was awkward. My spine may have developed a few new angles. But did they care? Not even a little. They were too busy cracking jokes, laughing like hyenas, and proudly parading me down the path.

Safety? Comfort? Basic human dignity? Left behind, somewhere around the money.

It was a sight straight out of a bizarre school play—two of my friends clutching my arms like they’d just caught a giant, flailing fish, while the other two had a firm grip on my legs, carrying me through the air like I was some grand prize they’d won at a village fair. All that was missing was a marching band and a confetti cannon.

Their faces were lit up with childlike glee, as if transporting an injured friend in the most undignified way possible was the highlight of their week. In the midst of this circus, there was Nisha—our one-girl emergency response team. Calm, focused, and completely unfazed by the madness, she took it upon herself to cradle my head like she was handling fragile cargo marked “*This side up*”.

While the others jiggled me around like a poorly wrapped parcel, Nisha made sure my skull stayed safely off the pavement. Honestly, if there were awards for “Best Supporting Friend in a Makeshift Medical Emergency,” she’d have taken gold.

The moment we stepped out of the college boundary, I wasted no time putting my foot down—figuratively, of course. I was still too sore to do it literally.

“I’m not going to the hospital,” I declared, as dramatically as one can while being carried like a lumpy sack of potatoes.

Manikant caught on immediately. “Relax Bro,” he said, patting my shoulder like a seasoned con artist. “No hospital. No needles. No lectures from doctors in white coats. We’ve got better plans.”

He grinned and leaned in like he was about to share a top-secret mission. “We just scored some extra cash. And you know what that means? Celebration!”

Now *that* got my attention.

Apparently, instead of wheeling me off to sterile corridors and the smell of antiseptic, they were planning a full-blown party to celebrate our latest little victory—one that I could barely remember through the haze of my fall but was happy to celebrate anyway. Our destination? The hostel..

We zoomed off on the scooter, a trio of joy and questionable balance—Nisha at the helm, me wedged in the middle, and Manikant clinging on behind. The rest of the gang had taken more dignified rides: Jimmy and Malik on Jimmy's Splendor bike, and the others crammed into an auto headed straight to the hostel.

For a brief, glorious moment, we looked like a scene from a feel-good college movie—until destiny (or just Nisha's shaky scooter skills) decided otherwise. Without warning, I was launched off the seat like a badly typed email hitting the spam folder. One second we were zipping along; the next, I was a tragic slapstick extra in our thrilling comedy.

Eventually, bruises and pride somewhat intact, we all regrouped at the hostel. Everyone bolted up the stairs to the first floor in a noisy stampede, leaving only me and Nisha behind. That's when she finally let her worries spill out.

Her eyebrows shot up so high they deserved their own billing in *Extreme Concern: The Musical*.

"Guys, seriously," she said, voice tight with nerves. "He fell from a building. An actual building. What if he's in shock? Or seriously hurt? Shouldn't we—I don't know—help him upstairs? At least make sure Bhuwan reaches in the room safely?"

Her words landed like a dramatic monologue in a Bollywood climax. The group froze. For a heartbeat, it felt like she'd awakened some rare spark of responsibility in all of them.

Then, as if on cue, they clapped their hands together, eyes wide with faux sincerity.

Mani: “You’re absolutely right. Brilliant idea! You should definitely help Thiru up the stairs. And while you handle that noble task... we’ll take on the crucial mission of fetching snacks.”

The mood shifted instantly. Heads bobbed. Smiles spread. Agreement rippled through the group like a stadium wave at a cricket match.

“Wait—what?” Nisha blinked.

But it was too late. The rest had already christened themselves the Official Snack Retrieval Committee and were halfway out the door, buzzing with the self-importance of people convinced they were doing something heroic.

And so, the plan was sealed: Nisha would play Florence Nightingale on the staircase, while the others courageously hunted down chips.

Raju, ever the mischief-maker, couldn’t resist tossing in his own cheeky comment.

“Yeah, Nisha, if *you’re* the one helping him, he’ll probably enjoy it even more,” he said with a grin that practically had ‘troublemaker’ written all over it.

Nisha froze mid-step. Her expression was a whirlwind of shock, annoyance, and a tiny flicker of *is-this-really-my-life*. Her face alone could’ve launched a thousand eye rolls. She took a deep breath—possibly counting to ten in her head or silently plotting Raju’s slow and creative demise.

She mumbled something under her breath, too quiet to catch. It could’ve been a curse, or just her brain short-circuiting from the madness, or black magic spell. But despite the look on her face that screamed “*I am surrounded by ‘bastards’*”, she gave in. With an exaggerated sigh and the elegance of someone clearly regretting all their life choices, she turned to me.

“Fine. Let’s go,” she said, helping me limp up the stairs like some sort of reluctant nurse on her last nerve.

When we finally reached the room, she eased me onto my bed—which felt less like a place to rest and more like an old ironing board with a grudge. No matter how I shifted, comfort remained a distant dream.

“You need to rest,” she said firmly, in the same tone a bouncer might use to say, “*You need to leave.*”

Before I could even blink, the door burst open with the force of a CID serial action scene.(when Daya knocks the door).

It was Kailash, wide-eyed and breathless, having clearly just arrived from somewhere *very important*, like maybe he was shaving his under arms with (उस्तरा) **razor**.

“What happened to Thiru?” he asked, as if someone had just told him that, I’d been shot out of a cannon.

I raised a hand weakly. “Just fell off a building, no big deal.”

One by one, everyone jumped in with their own *highly creative* version of the story. There were dramatic gasps, wild hand gestures, even a slow-motion reenactment at one point. Each version got more dramatic than the last—someone swore I flipped mid-air, someone else claimed there were sparks, and I think Raju mentioned a passing raven that “might’ve nudged the brick.”

The room was charged with fake tension, all eyes locked on Kailash, waiting for his reaction.

And then... he laughed.

Loud, unstoppable laughter. The kind that makes you slap your knees and gasp for air. It echoed off the walls, completely out of sync with the tragic tone we were all going for.

Everyone froze. Nisha looked personally offended. Even the ceiling fan seemed to slow down in shock.

Still laughing, Kailash finally managed to say, “Wait, Thiru... are you even *actually* hurt?”

I groaned from the bed, raising one hand like a weary ghost.

“A whole damn *brick* fell on my face, bro! I can barely stand!”

Manikant chimed in helpfully, “Man, we should’ve asked those Japanese delegates for some Japanese oil. Bhuwan would’ve been sprinting laps by now.”

Sheetesh leaned in with a smirk. “Dude... that oil’s for *something else* entirely. Harden the soft.”

A beat of silence. And then chaos. Half the room burst out laughing again while Nisha muttered something about “being the only adult girl there.”

Praval doubled over with laughter, practically wheezing as he wiped imaginary tears from his eyes.

“You don’t understand,” he said between chuckles. “This Japanese oil is next-level magic. It can make things *stand up* that don’t even have bones! Imagine that! No bones—and still standing tall!”

He paused for dramatic effect, then added with a flourish, “Now Bhuwan’s leg *does* have bones, solid ones, so obviously he would gonna be more than fine. Probably run a marathon by morning!”

The room erupted in laughter. Even I had to admit, it was impressively stupid logic.

“Guys, *please*,” I groaned from the bed. “There’s a girl in the room!”

Everyone immediately froze. Heads turned in all directions like meerkats on alert.

“Wait... what girl?” someone said.

“Where? We don’t see any girl,” another added, squinting theatrically at the corners of the room.

I pointed, deadpan. “*Nisha*.”

They all nodded solemnly, then continued the charade. “Nope. Still don’t see a girl.”



“Maybe she’s invisible or maybe she left the moment we started talking about the oil.”

Nisha stood in the middle of it all, arms on the hip, lips twitching as she fought back a laugh. You could see the war on her face: should she laugh... or throw something?

Finally, with a sigh that could’ve powered a windmill, she grabbed her bag and walked to the door.

“You guys,” she said, dead serious, “you are *all* going to die single.”

The door shut behind her.

A beat of silence. Then Praval raised a finger and announced, “Totally worth it.”

The room roared.

In a sudden burst of urgency—as if he’d just been summoned by the gods of overreaction—Kailash bolted to his room. His footsteps thundered down the corridor like he was on a mission to hide the porn magazines.

Moments later, he returned triumphantly, waving a bottle of *Navaratnam Thanda Tel* like it was a sacred relic. That legendary potion of coolness. The poor man looked genuinely proud, as if he’d brought home a Nobel Prize in pain relief.

Without a word, he popped the cap and got straight to work. Before I could protest—or even flinch—he was already pouring a small lake of the icy stuff onto my head and massaging it in with the fervour of a roadside barber trying to meet a daily quota.

Instantly, a wave of coolness swept over me. It felt like my brain had opened a tiny spa, complete with minty air-conditioning and Himalayan winds.

For a moment, I forgot the brick, the pain, and even the deeply questionable jokes from earlier. All I could do was exhale and murmur, “Ohhhh... that’s the stuff.”

In just two minutes, I went through a transformation so bizarre, it could've made it into the Guinness Book of "What the Hell Just Happened?"

Thanks to Kailash and his enthusiastic oil therapy, my head now felt like it had been teleported straight to the Himalayas—icy, tingling, and suspiciously minty. Meanwhile, the rest of my body was still very much in Patna, roasting like a *sutki mach* (dried fish on sand) under the relentless summer sun.

The contrast was *wild*. My face was frozen solid, like I'd face-planted into a freezer full of peppermint, while my arms and legs were drenched in sweat, wondering why I had personally offended the sun.

I lay there, shivering from the neck up and sweating from the neck down, caught in some strange thermal tug-of-war. It was like my body had booked a roundtrip flight between Antarctica and Sahara—but forgot to take me along for the ride.

Confused, dazed, and feeling like a half-cooked dessert—ice cream on top, hot jalebi below—I blinked at the ceiling fan and whispered, "Am I... melting or freezing?"

Nobody had an answer. But everyone agreed: I looked ridiculous.

The whole experience felt like a strange mix of awe and mild panic—like watching a magician pull a rabbit out of a hat and realizing the rabbit might actually be you. A tiny voice inside my head whispered, "*What if it had been worse? What if that brick had hit just a little to the left? Or harder?*"

But as I lay there, half-frozen, half-baked, and drenched in minty oil, a wave of sweet relief washed over me. I was alive. No broken bones. No stitches. Just a shiny forehead and a lingering scent strong enough to repel mosquitoes for miles.

Kailash leaned in with a grin. "Feeling better now?"

I looked up at him like a hero returning from battle and said, “Thank you, my friend. May God bless me with a long life... preferably at *your* expense.”

He stared at me, blinked, and then burst out laughing. “Fair enough,” he said. “Just don’t die on my bed, okay?”

## CHAPTER 4

### Moksha

For a brief, blissful moment, everything felt perfectly in place. I was with my usual crew—Praval, Raju, Sheetesh, Manikant, and the rest—lounging around as if idleness was our full-time job (which, let's be honest, it practically was). They were in their element: firing off absurd jokes, laughing even harder at the worse ones, and swapping stories that grew taller with every retelling. Their voices wove together into a kind of background music—part sitcom laugh track, part comfort blanket—and I couldn't imagine a better soundtrack for that moment.

From the corner of the room, “*Dilli Ki Sardi*” played softly on the computer speakers. That song—so full of wintery charm—felt like an ironic slap in the face, given that we were currently cooking alive in Patna's finest summer roast. And yet, somehow, the music, the company, and the lingering cool tingle of *Navaratnam* oil on my scalp made the moment feel... perfect.

I lay there on my rock-hard hostel bed, smelling like a walking menthol advertisement, and thought, *This is what heaven must feel like—with less air conditioning.*

Then I noticed Kailash. Poor guy looked like he was melting from the inside out. He wiped his forehead with the desperation of a man betrayed by both summer and ceiling fans.

He stared at me with longing—specifically at my chilled, oil-glazed forehead—and muttered, “I need that. I *need* the oil.”

Before any of us could stop him, he grab the bottle and sprinted to his room with the determination of someone chasing enlightenment—or at least relief from sweat rash. We watched him vanish down the hallway, silent for a beat.

Then Praval nodded and said, “Now we are about to experience spiritual awakening.”

About ten minutes later, Kailash made his grand re-entry—glowing like a man freshly baptized by the gods of menthol.

He had clearly gone *all in* with the Navaratnam oil. Every visible patch of skin shimmered like he'd been marinated. From the tips of his fingers to the roots of his hair, he glistened like a contestant in an overenthusiastic desi spa challenge.

He strutted into the room with the calm confidence of someone who had discovered inner peace—or at least inner coolness.

“I can’t believe I’m still in Patna,” he announced, arms spread wide like he’d just walked off the set of a fairness cream commercial. “It’s boiling outside, and yet I feel like I’m chilling on an iceberg... in Switzerland... wearing nothing.”

We stared in disbelief. He looked like a peppermint-scented gummy bear.

“And now,” he added with flair, “I think I deserve a nice, long, luxurious bath to really seal the deal.”

And with that, he turned on his heel and marched to the bathroom with the determination of a man going to war—with heat.

As the door shut behind him, Praval mumbled, “At this rate, he’ll come out with frostbite.”

Barely two minutes had passed since Kailash disappeared into the bathroom, and just as we were sinking back into our cozy post-lunch laziness, the peace shattered like a cheap glass dropped on a marble floor.

The bathroom door flew open with a bang, and Kailash came storming in like a man possessed by ghost. His eyes were wild, his hands flailing, and he was yelling something that sounded like a mix between tribal chanting in French accent.

We all froze.

For a full three seconds, no one blinked. It was like watching a wild animal burst into a tea party. Full naked.

Then, chaos.

“What the hell?” shouted Praval.

“Speak in Hindi, you idiot!” Raju cried, practically jumping to his feet.

“We don’t speak *Chinese mandarin!*” I yelled, as we all backed away like he might explode—or cast a spell.

Kailash was hopping from one foot to the other, waving his arms like a windmill caught in a storm, his oil-glazed skin gleaming under the day light.

“*Thanda! Bahut Thanda!*” he finally managed to shout. “Bastards, It’s TOO cold!” in trembling voice.

In response to our completely reasonable request that he *please, for the love of God, speak in Hindi*, Kailash whirled around, eyes blazing, arms still flapping like he was trying to fly his way out of this dimension.

“You fools!” he bellowed, with the dramatic flair “Can’t you see I’m standing on the edge of destruction—and *you* people are worried about *subtitles?*”

The question hanging in the air was simple enough: *What do we do, and how do we do it?*

Before anyone could attempt a serious answer, someone let out a loud snort. All eyes turned to him—he looked like a man trapped somewhere between a freezer and toaster, hair sticking out in chaotic directions, his skin slick with cooling oil as if he’d just wrestled a machine and lost.

We were trying to process the emergency. He, clearly, was trying to survive an arctic blast he had brought upon himself with industrial quantities of Navaratnam oil and a cold shower.

And yet, in all this chaos, one thing was clear: he thought he was in a survival drama.

We thought we were watching a sitcom (situational comedy).

What came next can only be described as a full-blown, hostel-grade catastrophe.

Kailash—wearing nothing—came sprinting down the corridor like a man possessed. His body gleamed with Navaratnam oil, his eyes wide with raw panic, and his legs pumping as though someone had installed jet propulsion in his backside.

*“Help me!”* he shrieked. *“Oh God, I’m on fire! I’m gonna die! Somebody save me!”*

Except... he wasn't on fire.

He was cold. *Too* cold. Ice-age-level cold.

The poor guy had slathered himself in cooling oil and then, in a moment of genius, taken a cold shower. Now, he was experiencing what can only be described as *an internal snowstorm*—and dragging the entire hostel into it.

His voice echoed through the halls like a tragic opera sung by a man naked standing on Everest. Doors flung open. Heads popped out. People rushed to windows. A few screamed.

“What’s going on?!” someone yelled.

“Is it a ghost? A thief? A naked protest?”

“Nah, it’s just Kailash,” someone replied. “Having a personal climate crisis.”

As he bolted past stunned roommates and bewildered seniors, his cries reverberated through the building like a siren on full blast. And just like that, our quiet afternoon was over. The calm had been shattered. The legend of *Kailash vs. Navaratnam Oil* was born.

While the entire hostel broke into chaos around me, I stood there like some ancient philosopher in chappals—calm, composed, and slightly amused.

Kailash, meanwhile, had transformed into a human bar of soap. Thanks to the generous layer of Navaratnam oil glistening on his body, he slipped through everyone's hands like a greased pig in a village fair. Every time someone lunged to catch him, he slid away with the elegance of a butter and the urgency of a man being chased by frostbite.

**Then**, someone—God bless their wild imagination—shouted, "आग लग गई है!" ("He's on fire!")

And that was it. The chaos levelled up. Within minutes, boys from three floors above descended like firefighters during a drill—except their fire truck was a chain of plastic buckets and their fire was... Kailash. And poor Kailash had no clue that a tsunami was headed his way.

Before he could explain that he was battling cold, *not combustion*, the first bucket hit.

Then the second.

Then the third.

By the time they reached bucket number nine, Kailash wasn't just cold—he had entered a new realm of existence: **frozen, flattened, and flabbergasted.**

He finally collapsed onto the floor with all the grace of a jute sack full of wet rice—*thud*. A collective gasp rose from the crowd. For a second, the hostel went quiet. Then someone whispered, "Did we just kill him?"

I turned to face the self-declared "fire brigade"—a ragtag bunch of overenthusiastic amateurs who had clearly watched one too many action movies and decided they were now the guardians of public safety.



"You absolute lunatics!" I snapped, soaked to the bone and fuming. "Did any of you actually *see* a fire? Like, with flames and smoke and all that? Or were you just so drunk on heroism that you thought, 'Hey, let's flood the place and see what happens'?"

My voice echoed around the room like a soggy war cry. They just stood there, buckets still in hand, looking sheepish—like kids caught with slingshots aimed at a beehive.

I couldn't believe it. What made them think it was a good idea to try and drown someone in the name of disaster management? There I stood, dripping and dumbfounded, trying to wrap my head around their logic—or complete lack thereof. Had they even *considered* the consequences? Or were they just high on their own misplaced sense of duty, playing emergency response team in a drama that didn't exist?

Honestly, if this was their idea of heroism, the world was in deep trouble.

Just as I had feared, one overly enthusiastic member of our so-called emergency crew decided it was *his* moment to shine. Puffing up like a peacock at a science fair, he loudly proclaimed, "Well, I didn't *see* any fire... but judging by the screaming and general chaos, I'm pretty sure Kailash got scalded by steam. Definitely burns. Serious ones."

We all turned to look at him—blinking, silent, stunned. His confident diagnosis, built on exactly zero facts, hung in the air like a wet towel on a broken clothesline. It was honestly impressive how firmly he stood by his theory, despite the complete lack of, you know, *evidence*.

I looked around, baffled. This was the level of logic we were dealing with? I took a deep breath and addressed them with as much sincerity as I could muster:

"Please. I beg you all. Never—**never**—consider a career in firefighting. Or any emergency service, for that matter. Society simply cannot afford the risk."

As if on cue, they gently hoisted poor Kailash off the damp floor like a sack of wet laundry and carried him to his bed. With all the grace of a parcel being returned to sender, he was plopped onto the mattress, in the naïve hope that sleep might cure whatever psychological stampede he was going through.

But the moment his eyelids fluttered open, panic hit him like a cold bucket of reality.

“*Help!*” he screamed, flailing under his bedsheet. “I’m freezing! I’m dying! SAVE ME!”

And just like that, he launched into a divine roll call, frantically summoning every god and goddess he could remember. By the time we got to *Hanuman*, he’d already name-dropped at least sixteen deities and was halfway through the rest of the 33 koti.

Watching Kailash tremble like a washing machine on spin cycle, a wave of very unhelpful thoughts crashed into my brain. One terrible realization stood out above the rest: **I had absolutely no idea how to save him.** None. Zero. I was as useless as a ceiling fan in a snowstorm.

A rising panic gripped me. Was this... was this **hypothermia**? The dreaded condition where your body gets so cold it basically gives up on being warm ever again? I remembered a documentary I’d once seen on the Discovery Channel—probably meant for wilderness survivors, not hostel survivors—and suddenly the images came flooding back.

It had shown frostbitten hikers with icicles for eyebrows and that slow, dramatic narrator voice: “*When the body’s core temperature drops, the brain shuts down, limbs go numb, and death may soon follow...*”

That was all I needed to remember. My anxiety went from mild to full-blown Discovery Channel emergency mode. And there was Kailash, lying there like a burrito of doom, shivering, confused, and possibly imagining himself somewhere between Siberia and a freezer aisle. I couldn’t tell if he was mumbling mantras or just losing track of reality—but either way, it was getting real. Fast.

As the seriousness of the situation sank in—like a wet blanket nobody asked for—I felt a sudden urge to speak. This wasn't just drama anymore; this was *potentially* life-threatening drama, which, in our hostel, was practically sacred territory. Everyone needed to understand that Kailash wasn't just shivering for attention—this was the real deal.

So I laid it all out: the symptoms, the danger, the Discovery Channel-level disaster we might be witnessing. The room fell silent, heads nodding, faces frozen with worry... or maybe confusion. Hard to tell with this group.

Then, out of nowhere, Raju—who had been as quiet as a monk on mute mode—cleared his throat and spoke, his eyebrows doing all the heavy lifting.

“Brother,” he said solemnly, “I fear the only way to save him is to... regulate his body temperature.”

The way he said it, you'd think he was revealing a secret scroll of ancient wisdom. But despite the overly dramatic delivery, he was right. Kailash needed warmth, fast. The only problem? We had no clue how to do that without accidentally roasting him alive or setting something on fire. Again.

Praval stood there, looking like someone had just asked him to explain quantum physics using vegetables. His eyes darted toward Raju, trying to decode the very serious medical suggestion that had just been made, eyebrows tangled in confusion.

“Regulate body temperature?” he repeated, as if hoping someone might offer a simpler, less terrifying translation—maybe something involving soup.

That's when Sheetesh, who clearly had been waiting for his dramatic moment, stepped forward like a man unveiling a forbidden truth.

“What it *really* means,” he said, with the solemnity of a priest announcing a divine prophecy, “is that someone... will have to sleep next to him. Without clothes.”

The room froze.

Even the crow hesitated outside the window upon seeing Kailash dying.

You could almost hear Praval's brain screeching to a halt. His mouth opened slightly, as if to say something, but his soul had clearly left the chat.

It was a plot twist no one saw coming. Not even the writers of *CID* would have dared.

Sheetesh's words hung in the air like a forgotten gym sock—awkward, undeniable, and incredibly hard to ignore.

As the shocking idea fully landed like a badly aimed missile, Malik's eyes bulged so wide you'd think he'd just witnessed a ghost—a **naked one**.

"Wait... *WHAT?!*" he shrieked, practically leaping back as if the words themselves were radioactive. "You were... *unclothed?* With *him?* Are you out of your MIND? That's— that's *disgusting!*"

His voice shot up an octave, teetering somewhere between a scandalized aunt and a goat in distress. The very *thought* of such a scene made him physically recoil, as though someone had thrown a cold, wet sock at his face.

You could see the mental horror movie playing behind his eyes—complete with slow motion, dramatic lighting, and the kind of background music that only comes with trauma.

Malik was fighting for his sanity, trying desperately to un-see what he had just imagined. But the image—burned into his brain with cinematic clarity—wasn't going anywhere.

Raju, clearly struggling to process the situation, threw up his hands and declared, "Look, I always imagined a moment like this with *Kate Winslet*—you know, the Titanic actress, all steamy windows and violins. But not with *this swine!* This is a crime against dreams!"

I couldn't help it—I was hooked. Their exchange was too ridiculous, too oddly poetic to ignore. I leaned in, trying to catch every word, expecting nonsense and getting... well, more nonsense, but with unexpected familiarity.

That's when it hit me like a well-aimed slipper: they were both talking about the **same Discovery Channel episode** I had been haunted by earlier. The one about hypothermia, frostbite, and movie scene where, people hugging each other for warmth in places where no one should be hugging.

It was bizarrely touching. Here we were, a bunch of sleep-deprived, semi-hysterical hostelites, all traumatized and educated by the same episode of *Man vs. Nature*. And now, that episode was shaping our emergency strategy—God help us all.

Who would've thought a documentary could unite three very different minds in such a dramatic, slightly inappropriate crisis? If nothing else, it was proof that television truly does bring people together. Usually on the couch. Occasionally in bed. Hopefully not naked.

A storm of irritation exploded inside me, and before I knew it, I was shouting—half in disbelief, half in pure, boiling frustration.

"You *perverted* fools!" I yelled, waving my arms like a traffic cop having a meltdown. "I was talking about *blankets!* *Quilts!* You know—soft, fluffy, innocent things that keep people warm! Not whatever sick, scandalous nonsense is cooking in your overheated brains!"

I gestured wildly, like I was trying to physically swat their dirty thoughts out of the air. How had a wholesome discussion about bedding turned into a full-blown adult-rated drama?

**all** I wanted—was to celebrate the magic of wrapping someone in a warm, cozy blanket. Maybe a charming old quilt that smelled slightly of detergent and comfort. But no—these guys took the express train to Sleaze Ville without even stopping for common sense.

Honestly, I'd never imagined I'd have to defend the moral purity of a *blanket*.

Raju let out a long, dramatic sigh—the kind that usually comes before a tragic announcement. “Bro,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose like a man on the verge of filing a complaint with life itself, “do you even *know* what month it is? It’s *June*. Outside feels like someone left the oven on, and all the blankets and quilts have been packed away like cursed relics. Taking them out now would be a crime against summer.”

Unfortunately, while Raju was busy negotiating with the climate, Kailash was spiralling—fast.

His brain, once full of wild ideas and unsolicited opinions, now seemed to be buffering endlessly. You could practically hear the dial-up tone inside his skull. His body shook with such intensity it looked like he'd swallowed a dozen power tools set to ‘maximum vibration.’ The poor guy had turned into a one-man earthquake.

Everyone stood there, stunned. This wasn’t just Kailash being dramatic. This was *serious*. The signs were all there—his glazed-over eyes, his trembling limbs, and the fact that he'd stopped yelling insults and started whispering to imaginary gods. The room had officially crossed from *hostel chaos* into *medical emergency* territory.

And suddenly, the heat of June didn’t seem like the biggest problem anymore.

“I’m telling you—if we want to save him, we need to bring the blankets out of exile!” I shouted, like a general giving orders in the middle of a very sweaty war.

Something about the desperation in my voice must’ve worked, because suddenly the whole gang scattered like pigeons after a firecracker. Doors slammed open, slippers flapped at lightning speed, and the corridor filled with the chaotic symphony of a hostel on a mission.

Everyone ran to their rooms, snatching up anything remotely warm—bedsheets, bath towels, shawls, someone even showed up with what looked suspiciously like a curtain.

Within minutes, we had transformed Kailash into a glorified laundry burrito. Layer upon layer of cloth was piled onto him until only the tip of his nose was visible—like a snowman who'd wandered into a linen shop during a clearance sale.

But our victory was short-lived.

Despite wrapping him in enough fabric to smother a medium-sized elephant, Kailash was still trembling like a Nokia 3315 phone on silent mode. The bed itself had turned into a full-body massage chair, minus the comfort and with triple the anxiety.

We all stood there, watching him shake like he'd just licked a live wire, unsure if we were helping or just participating in a very weird group panic.

The worry hung thick in the room—like the smell of hostel socks—but we knew one thing for sure: whatever this was, it wasn't normal. And we had to act before our human maraca of a friend vibrated straight through the floor.

In a last-ditch attempt to stop Kailash from vibrating himself into another dimension, a few more brave souls joined the growing rescue squad. Without hesitation—nor much thought, to be honest—they climbed onto him, one by one, like people trying to hold down a trampoline in a windstorm.

Their plan? **Weight therapy.**

Their method? **Human paperweights.**

Soon, Kailash was pinned beneath a small pyramid of hostel boys, arms and legs splayed out like he was the main course at a very confused potluck. It looked like a failed yoga class collided with a mosh pit.

For twenty long, sweaty, uncomfortable minutes, this bizarre blanket-and-body operation continued. Miraculously, he did start to

settle a bit. The trembling reduced from “earthquake during final exams” to “slight tremor after a bad meal.”

But it still wasn’t enough. He was stable-ish, not stable. And let’s face it—lying under a stack of half-dressed roommates wasn’t exactly the kind of long-term medical care anyone recommends.

Everyone in the room could feel it: **this wasn’t over**. The tension thickened like hostel chai left too long on the stove. We needed a better plan. A smarter plan.

And then—just when things seemed completely out of hand, with half the hostel piled on Kailash like human paperweights and everyone else sweating bullets—a sudden hush fell over the room.

Raju, our self-declared hostel philosopher and part-time conspiracy theorist, stepped forward with the slow, dramatic elegance of someone who’d just solved a murder mystery on TV. His eyes sparkled with what he clearly believed was divine insight, and he carried the seriousness of a man who had just been visited by a vision.

He stood up in the middle of the room, took a deep breath, and “There is only *one* solution,” he declared, sounding like a cross between a yoga guru and an action movie villain. “Just one.”

Everyone stared at him, blank like dead fish laid out in a market. You could practically hear the collective brain cells firing—was he going to summon a doctor? Pull out a miracle medicine? Reveal he’d been secretly studying hypothermia in night school?

“I need ten minutes,” Raju said, gravely. “Wait for me. I will be back(terminator style).”

And with that, he spun around like a sage disappearing into a fog of legend—or, more accurately, into the dusty hallway outside our room—and vanished.

We stared at the empty doorway in stunned silence.

What was he about to do? Fetch help? Find a cure? Or, more likely, dig something ridiculous out of nowhere?



No one knew.

But one thing was clear: the next ten minutes were going to be *weird*.

We stood there, trapped in a moment that refused to end—like a movie that keeps pretending to finish but somehow rolls into another climax. The tension was so thick, you could’ve cut it with a mess-tin spoon. Every ticking second dragged on painfully, stretching time like old hostel chewing gum stuck under a study table.

Around the room, a weird cocktail of hope and impatience brewed in everyone's faces. Some looked like they were awaiting divine intervention, others like they were just trying not to pass out from the sheer awkwardness of it all.

And then—at *long last*—Raju returned.

He didn’t float in on a magic carpet, but he might as well have. And in his arms? Bottles. **Several bottles.** Of rum.

The labels shimmered like golden tickets under the dim hostel lights. It was official: Raju hadn’t gone to fetch a doctor, or a heater for help.

No. He’d brought *liquid salvation*.

A slow gasp rippled through the room—part awe, part confusion, part "Wait, is this real?"

With the rum glinting in his hands like Excalibur, Raju grinned and simply said, "Gentlemen... the cure has arrived."

I stared at Raju like he’d just suggested to start a bonfire in the middle of the Sahara.

"Wait, wait... you’re actually suggesting we give him *rum*?" I asked, my eyebrow practically jumping off my forehead.

"Is this possible? Have you lost what little sense you had?"

Outside, the sun was doing its best impression of a microwave. The air was thick enough to chew. And here you are, proposing a round of drinks—as if this were some tropical vacation and not a full-blown medical emergency.

But Raju, cool as ever, just shrugged and held up the bottle like it was a sacred relic.

“This is the only way,” he said solemnly. “Besides... what warmth is even *left* in Kailash’s body for ever?”

I looked over at Kailash, who still resembled a shivering burrito wrapped in three blankets and pure confusion.

Honestly? The man looked like he’d been left in the freezer section of a supermarket.

And suddenly... Raju’s madness didn’t seem *entirely* mad.

I gave Raju a slow, hesitant nod—part agreement, part *what-the-hell-is-going-on* surrender mode. But then my eyes dropped to the bounty in his hands: not one, not two, but **three** full bottles of rum.

That was when my brain officially short-circuited again.

“Wait a second,” I said, squinting at the bottles like they might explain themselves. “*Three?* What are we doing, throwing a birthday? Surely one’s enough for Kailash, right? He’s freezing, not hosting a pirate convention.”

Raju turned to me with the calm confidence of a man who’d thought this through far more than anyone should.

He smirked and said, “One is for him, bro. The other two are for us.”

I blinked. “*Us?*”

“Yeah,” he said with complete sincerity. “If Kailash survives—we party. If he becomes a *Lash*...dead body” (he paused for dramatic effect) “...we drink to mourn.”

For a moment, there was only silence. Then someone in the room muttered, “Makes sense.”

And somehow, terrifyingly... it kind of did.

I stared at Raju, utterly speechless. The man had just spun such a flawless web of logic around three bottles of booze that even Aristotle would’ve paused to take notes. It was like watching a masterclass in justification—tailored exclusively for drunkards.

He had every angle covered. Whether Kailash made it or not, the rum *had a purpose*. Joy or grief, celebration or mourning—either way, bottoms up. It was the kind of airtight reasoning only someone with years of “hydration experience” could come up with.

In that moment, I realized something profound: Raju wasn’t just drinking rum. He was defending it like a seasoned lawyer with a drinking habit and no conscience. And I couldn’t even argue with him. Not because he was right, but because he *sounded* right. Which, in these situations, was basically the same thing.

Some people bend the world to suit their desires. Raju? He just uncorked it and poured himself a glass.

With all the swagger of a mad scientist unveiling his latest experiment, Raju uncorked a bottle of rum and poured what looked suspiciously like half a litre—but was technically “just” 250 ml—into a glass. He handed it to Kailash with the authority of a doctor prescribing a life-saving potion.

“Down it. All of it. One shot,” Raju commanded, as if he were curing the common cold with ‘Old Monk.’

Kailash hesitated, eyeing the glass like it was a cup of boiling lava. But Raju’s persistence—and the dramatic backdrop of Kailash’s visible shivering—eventually won. In one heroic, shuddering gulp, he drank it.

Then he paused for a second—just long enough for us to think he’d be fine— and **SNATCH!** The bottle was in his hand.

Without warning, he tilted it back and went full waterfall mode— **“Gulp! Gulp! Gulp!”**

In three heroic swigs, it was gone. Finished. History.

We just stood there, jaws unhinged, tongues rolling out like red carpets welcoming that non-sense performance.

And then... magic.

Within minutes, the violent spasms in his body began to ease. His limbs stopped twitching like a malfunctioning robot, and a ghost of warmth crept back into his system. Ten minutes later, the human icicle had turned into a geyser.

Blankets flew off as Kailash sat up, wide-eyed and steaming like a pressure cooker. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead, slowly forming into full-blown rivulets that ran down his face like a faulty municipal tap left open during peak hours.

The transformation was so dramatic, we half-expected him to start singing item numbers next. From frozen statue to full-blown sauna, Kailash was back—just heavily marinated in rum.

Just when we thought Kailash had escaped the icy jaws of death, a brand-new villain entered the scene—and no, it wasn't the landlord this time. It was... Navaratnam oil.

Yes, that famously “cooling” herbal potion, generously massaged into his skin earlier in a moment of chaotic optimism, had now betrayed us. Instead of helping, it had turned Kailash into a human paradox—a man simultaneously on fire *and* stuck inside an ice cube.

On the outside, the minty Navaratnam oil wrapped around him like a layer of cling film dipped in menthol, keeping every degree of heat *out*. On the inside, the rum raged like a furnace, boiling him from within. His body couldn't decide whether it was in Shimla or Sahara.

We watched in baffled silence as Kailash lay there trapped between extremes—too hot to chill, too chilled to sweat it out

properly. It was as if someone had thrown him into a washing machine with both the “Hot Wash” and “Cool Rinse” settings activated at once.

Science and biology had clearly left the room. This was a war of elements, and poor Kailash was the battlefield.

For a fleeting moment, all of us stood there like statues in a wax museum—united, yes, but by a very particular kind of paralysis: good old-fashioned, Grade-A confusion. Nobody had a clue what to do next.

Should we wrap Kailash up again in his favourite blanket burrito and hope for the best?

Maybe swaddle him like a newborn and pray the heat didn’t turn him into a steamed momo? Or... should we march him off to the bathroom for another round of gentle bathing, hoping the water would wash away not just his discomfort but also the tragic cocktail of rum, mint oil, and regret clinging to his soul?

The room was thick with hesitation—so thick you could slice it, fry it, and serve it with a side of chutney. Every option felt risky. Every move, a potential disaster. We were stuck in a weird, emotional traffic jam—one wrong turn and Kailash could go from mildly sweaty to fully pickled.

And so, we stood there... blinking, sweating, overthinking—and quietly hoping someone else would make the decision for us.

After what felt like the longest group thinking session since the invention of group projects, we finally arrived at a decision: we’d do... absolutely nothing.

Yes, after all that hand-wringing, chin-stroking, and over-analysis worthy of a Nobel Prize committee, we decided to just let Kailash be. No more blankets. No more baths. No more desperate hacks involving alcohol and Ayurvedic oils. Just... leave him. Like a pressure cooker left to self-open.

Our brilliant logic? Simple. His body was currently hosting a bizarre internal tug-of-war: half of him shivering like a popsicle in Antarctica, the other half sweating like a politician in a sting operation. We figured, hey, nature knows what it's doing. Let the hot and cold battle it out and reach some sort of peace treaty.

So we backed off—respectfully, like monks who had just finished a sacred ritual—and decided to trust the great cosmic thermostat. Sometimes, you just have to let the universe do its thing... preferably while watching from a safe distance, and maybe with a drink in hand.

Out of nowhere—like, genuinely nowhere—Kailash sat up straight. Ramrod straight. The kind of straight that makes you think, *wait, is this man about to launch into space?* But nope—he didn't fly off. He just... sat there. Cross-legged. Eyes shut. Face calm. And then, like some Buddha pose, he slipped into a deep, eerie silence.

We were dumbfounded.

This was Kailash, mind you. The same guy who once tried to heat milk with a water heater bar and claimed that mosquitoes respected him because of his “inner energy.” And now, here he was—dead still, not a twitch, not a blink—for thirty whole minutes. Thirty! That's longer than any of his relationships lasted.

At first, we waited for the punchline. Maybe he'd suddenly shout, “Gotcha!” or pretend to levitate using a hidden stool. But nothing. He was genuinely... meditating.

One by one, our mouths dropped open. The room grew quiet. Strangely respectful. It was like we were all in some ancient temple, witnessing a miracle—or the world's slowest prank.

Was he discovering the secrets of the universe?

Was this the beginning of his journey into enlightenment?

Or had he just dozed off with exceptionally good posture?

Hard to say.

But something about the stillness—the utter commitment to the bit (or the bliss)—made us feel weirdly inspired. We didn’t exactly start meditating ourselves, but we did lower our voices and tiptoe around like waiters in a five-star spa.

Whatever Kailash was doing, it was working. At least for that half hour, he wasn’t causing chaos, breaking stuff, or trying to cook noodles in sunlight. And honestly, that alone felt like spiritual progress.

In a plot twist no one (including Raju himself) saw coming, he suddenly transformed into “**Raju the Royal Bartender.**” The man poured drinks with the grave focus of someone mixing potions to save a kingdom—except his potion-making technique looked more like “guess and hope for the best.”

Each glass was filled so generously it could’ve qualified as a swimming pool. It wasn’t just a pour—it was an **attempted drowning**. Apparently, Raju believed sorrow doesn’t drown easy, so better to flood it entirely.

Meanwhile, on the other end of the room, Kailash hadn’t moved a muscle. Still in his Zen statue pose, he sat there like a local Buddha who’d wandered into our hostel by mistake and decided to stay. Eyes closed. Back straight. Not even flinching at the sound of ice cubes clinking or someone burping loudly after their first sip. His calm was... unsettling. In the best way.

The more we looked at him, the more the vibe in the room started to shift. The loud jokes became softer chuckles. The restless leg-tapping slowed. Even the guy who always coughed like he was auditioning for a TB awareness advertisement calmed down.

Something about Kailash’s stillness rubbed off on us—or maybe it was just the alcohol kicking in. Either way, we found ourselves sipping our drinks slowly, almost thoughtfully, as if the moment required respect. The silence wasn’t awkward anymore; it felt oddly... peaceful.

For once, nobody was arguing about politics, the mess menu, or who stole whose towel. It was just us, our drinks, and Kailash radiating spiritual warm invisible light from his silent corner. It was a rare kind of magic—the kind that doesn’t happen when you plan it, but just shows up when you least expect it. Like enlightenment.

And then, right when we were starting to wonder if we’d have to sprinkle water on him—or worse, call his parents—Kailash slowly opened his eyes.

We held our breath.

He looked around with the dazed expression of someone who’d just woken up from a dream involving aliens and a philosophical goat. His gaze was distant, like he’d just returned from the edge of the universe—or at least the edge of sleep.

Then, in a voice low and mysterious, he said: “Brothers and sisters... I almost reached the Vaitarini River.”(river of heaven)

We blinked.

“That eternal river,” he added, as if we needed clarification, “the one souls cross after death...”

He paused, letting the drama soak in like whisky into a paper napkin.

“There was a blinding light... all around me,” he whispered, eyes half open. “And then... I realized something.”

Here it came. The big truth. The secret of the cosmos.

“Everything is illusion, my friend. Everything is *Maya*.”

He let the word hang in the air like incense smoke.

“There is no difference between what is... and what isn’t. Reality... illusion... *same thing*. Everything is *Maya*...”

We stared at him in stunned silence. Not because of the philosophical depth—but because we couldn’t tell if he was having a spiritual breakthrough or had just taken a really intense nap.



Somewhere in the background, Raju muttered, “Bro, I think your chakras are drunk.”

But even he said it softly. Because honestly?

In that moment, Kailash kind of *did* look like he’d shaken hands with the universe—and come back with a discount coupon for wisdom.

To our utter disbelief—and mild horror—our earlier jokes had somehow come true.

Kailash *had* reached enlightenment.

No, seriously. He wasn’t just pretending anymore. The guy looked like he’d just binge-watched the entire universe in HD and now understood everything from karma to drama.

As he sat there, cross-legged and glowing (okay, maybe it was just the tube light flickering behind his head, but still), there was a moment—a *real* moment—when we all stopped chewing, slurping, scratching, and breathing like buffoons. The air felt heavy. Charged. Like we were in the presence of something... *holy*.

It even looked like there was a halo forming behind Kailash’s head. Granted, it wasn’t just the ceiling fan’s shadow playing tricks, it was circle of light home how created by outer reflection, but who were we to question divine optics?

We stood frozen, wide-eyed, clutching our steel tumblers like village folk in a myth who’d just stumbled upon a saint meditating under a banyan tree. Any second now, we expected Kailash to float a few inches off the ground or recite ancient mantras in perfect Sanskrit—or at least start glowing like a freshly cleaned steel plate.

The atmosphere was electric with anticipation. Raju whispered, “I think he’s going to say something life-changing.”

We nodded in reverence. One guy even folded his hands, just in case.

It was surreal. Sacred. Magical. And also, slightly terrifying.

What if Kailash had really tapped into the cosmos? What if he started levitating? Or worse... what if he gave up non veg?

Sure, there was no actual divine spotlight from the heavens, no orchestra of angels, and no sudden gust of wind carrying flower petals into the room. But honestly, none of that mattered.

Because Kailash's words—however confusing, dramatic, and vaguely recycled from old spiritual forwards—*hit us*. Not like a hammer... more like a soft slipper of wisdom to the forehead.

He spoke of Maya, illusion, reality, the Vaitarini River, and somewhere in there, we *think* he also mentioned a talking buffalo—but the point is, the guy was *deep*. So deep, we half expected National Geographic to show up and start filming a documentary titled "*The Enlightenment of Hostel Room 06*."

Part of me was impressed. Another part was suspicious. And a third part—probably the part powered by late-night chai and sleep deprivation—was just deeply confused.

Nope. I was just there. Weirdly at peace. Caught in the strange magic of Kailash's transformation.

It was like he'd built an invisible cocoon around us—a temporary bubble where all pain, confusion, and roommate debt didn't matter. And inside that bubble, I found a rare, fleeting kind of freedom. A quiet little pause from the daily nonsense.

Of course, it didn't last. It never does. Reality has a habit of knocking on the door, usually holding a bill.

But for those few surreal minutes—while Kailash communed with the cosmos and we sat sipping our drinks in dazed silence—I felt oddly... okay. And that, my friend, is the real magic of hostel life. You never quite know if you're witnessing a spiritual awakening or just collectively hallucinating.

Still, one thought clung to me no matter how hard I tried to shake it off—like that one overfriendly cousin who shows up at

every wedding without an invite: What would happen when I finally stepped back onto campus?

Would they welcome me with open arms... or march me straight to the principal's office with a file titled "*This Guy's Greatest Mistakes – Volume III*"?

Would I still belong there? Could I stitch together the scraps of my 'student life' into something vaguely functional?

Honestly, I didn't know.

So after much deep thinking, we reached a decision—bold, slightly reckless, and absolutely perfect in that moment. We weren't going back to college.

Not yet, anyway. Two, maybe three days—that's all we needed. A short, strategic break. A self-declared festival of Doing Absolutely Nothing. This wasn't running away. This was recalibrating.

Because truth be told—our minds were frayed, our souls scrambled, and our attendance percentage was already in the ICU. A couple of days away from the chaos of assignments and surprise quizzes might just save what was left of our sanity.

We were convinced: this break would be a spiritual detox. We'd return refreshed, recharged, and—hopefully—not expelled.

As Kailash Baba—yes, that same guy who once tried to toast bread on an iron—now wisely puts it: "Reality, my friends, is just one big... *illusion*."

“सब मोह माया है”

he'd say—nodding with the calm intensity of a Guru who had glimpsed both the secrets of the universe and the testosterone graffiti on hostel bathroom walls."

And honestly? He had a point.

What we call “reality” might just be a tangled mess of our fears, dreams, family drama, group project trauma. It's less a clear picture and more what life *should* look like.

Kailash Baba—wrapped in a bedsheet like it's his spiritual robe—urged us to look beyond it all.

“Ask yourself,” he said once, mid-bite of Parle-G, “Is this *really* life? Or just a series of thoughts dressed up as truth, wearing society's expectations like a borrowed blazer?”

We didn't know whether to clap or check if he had a fever.

But deep down, we got it. He wasn't telling us to become monks. He was just nudging us to stop running on autopilot. To question things. To maybe, once in a while, look up from the chaos and ask: “Wait... am I living my life, or just reacting to it?”

And in that moment—surrounded by biscuit crumbs, borrowed wisdom, and the unmistakable smell of someone's unwashed socks—we felt just a little bit enlightened too.

Or maybe just a little bit sleep-deprived.

Hard to say, really.

## CHAPTER 5

# Tughlaqi Decree

After three glorious, guilt-ridden days of playing spiritual fugitives, we finally made our grand return to college.

And let's just say... karma was waiting for us at the gate, arms crossed, foot tapping.

Turns out, while we were off exploring the deeper meaning of life the administration had not, in fact, forgotten about us. Nope. They had taken *official* notice of our vanishing act. And now, like seasoned bureaucratic bounty hunters, they demanded written explanations.

Yes—**written**.

Suddenly, we weren't students anymore. We were amateur novelists, brainstorming dramatic tales that would tug at the heartstrings of the college authorities. Illness, family emergencies, unexpected pilgrimages, spiritual crises—we threw everything into the pot.

Unfortunately, it didn't take long to realize something horrible: **every single excuse sounded exactly like the last one.**

"Sir, I was unwell..."

"My uncle's dog was unwell..."

"We all became mentally unwell..."

No matter how much creative flair we added, every story came out smelling like the same reheated excuse. Even we wouldn't have believed them—and we *wrote* them!

The anxiety started creeping in as we stood there, holding our scribbled justifications like crumpled confessions at a trial. We knew the time for evasive philosophy and poetic detours was over.

We had reached the final boss level of college life: **explaining ourselves to The Administration**. And we were armed with nothing but bad handwriting and worse alibis.

The excuses poured in like a monsoon of melodrama—and let me tell you, they covered the full emotional spectrum from *barely believable* to *Bollywood-level bonkers*.

One guy stepped forward with the solemn face of a man wronged by fate and declared, “Sir, I had a car accident.” He said it with such seriousness, we half expected him to limp for dramatic effect. Never mind that none of us remembered him owning a car. Or even knowing how to drive.

Then came the next tale—a heartfelt lament about a missing dog. “Sir, he’s like family to me,” he said, his voice wobbling just enough to suggest either deep emotional distress or poorly timed hiccups. The dog, apparently, vanished without a trace. Posters were printed, neighbours questioned, prayers whispered. It was less of an excuse and more of a tragic drama waiting to happen.

And then came the final blow: the Grandma Gambit.

“My granny fell down the stairs,” anotherone said, eyes lowered in performative grief. The room instantly grew silent, heads nodding solemnly—because when a grandmother enters the story, all jokes are legally suspended for at least 30 seconds.

Between the car crashes, canine mysteries, and stair-related tragedies, the room felt like a mash-up of a Indian soap opera and a crime thriller. Each excuse was more emotional than the last, and by the end of it, even we didn’t know whether to laugh, cry, or write them all down for future reference.

One thing was clear: our group had many talents—academic brilliance wasn’t one of them, but **creative storytelling under pressure?** Oh, we were artists.

Just when we thought the excuses couldn’t get any more dramatic, the plot took a wild twist straight out of a college edition of *Crime Patrol*.

It turned out—brace yourselves—all those excuses were somehow connected.

Yes, like an action sequence that tried its best to be epic... and ended up accidentally emotional instead.

First, the ‘Dog story’ Guy. He wasn’t just chasing after a missing pet. No, sir. His furry friend had suddenly gone full-on *Fast & Furious*, sprinting into the middle of the traffic. Naturally, our guy dove in heroically, shouting things like “Tommy, no!” and nearly causing three scooters to skid and a vegetable cart to tip over.

**Enter:** Car Accident Guy.

He was the poor soul who swerved to avoid the dog-saving crusader and crashed his already struggling vehicle into a lamppost—thus, technically making his excuse *mostly* true. The car was indeed dented, though his ego may have suffered the most damage.

**And** now, for the emotional climax: Grandma Guy.

Upon hearing the news of this street-side drama via a panicked phone call (“Bro, the dog’s loose! Someone crashed!”), he panicked. In a burst of adrenaline, he dashed downstairs—only to accidentally body-slam his unsuspecting grandmother mid-descent. Poor Nani (grandmother) tumbled, he tripped, and the end result was one fractured leg, one broken heart, and one very awkward family dinner.

Somehow, this bizarre sequence of dog chases, near-death traffic stunts, and unintentional grandmother injuries had connected their fates like a tragic slapstick trilogy.

In the end, what began as three separate excuses merged into one legendary story—an epic saga of chaos, compassion, and the very real consequences of overreacting to group chats.

The moment I heard that wild nugget of information, my brain did a double-take. I couldn't help myself—I leaned in, eyes wide, and asked, “Wait a second... was it really necessary to mash all those stories together like that?”

Honestly, I was just trying to figure out if connecting those totally unrelated events actually made the whole thing deeper... or if they were just fine on their own, thank you very much.

But before I could even finish my philosophical pondering, the whole group burst out laughing—loud, carefree, belly-aching laughter. It was the kind of laugh that starts with one person and then spreads like a virus. In between gasps and giggles, someone shouted, “Oh, come on! Without a bit of masala in life, where's the fun?”

Another added, “Exactly! It's those unexpected plot twists that make everything spicy!”

And just like that, the serious moment evaporated into thin air, replaced by a chorus of cheerful banter and mock debates over which twist was the best one. The mood was electric—warm, goofy, and full of that familiar madness that only comes when friends start storytelling like it's an Olympic sport.

Turns out, whether the stories were connected or not didn't really matter. As long as they came with a few laughs, a pinch of exaggeration, and a sprinkle of drama, we were all in.

Honestly, I considered myself pretty lucky that my little “accident” happened in front of a bunch of eyewitnesses. I mean, sure, I was in pain—but at least I had an audience! Their dramatic retellings earned me just enough sympathy to smooth things over with the powers that be.

Wanting to avoid any mess or wild rumours spreading like hostel wildfire, I decided to take the high road. So, I marched



straight to Professor Pathak and gave him the world's fastest crash course on "What Really Happened." Just the right balance of truth, panic, and selective editing.

To my surprise, it worked like a charm. No warnings. No disciplinary notes. No awkward Chamber of Chu... sessions. Just a polite nod and a wave-off. I walked out of his office like a survivor of a courtroom drama who had just pulled off the perfect defence.

Unfortunately, not everyone was so lucky.

Remember those genius-level students who had earlier blamed their absence on their "grandmother's illness"? Yeah, that card had officially expired.

However, things took a dramatic nosedive for the "Grandma Funeral Club" when the college decided to call in the big guns—aka, their parents.

The atmosphere that day? Pure popcorn material. Everyone knew these guys weren't exactly the types to turn over a new leaf—unless it was to hide their attendance sheet under it. Their "grieving" stories had more plot holes than a B-grade soap opera.

That guy even claimed his guardian was his grandmother, and since her leg had broken, she couldn't come to college. Naturally, the college would have to wait at least six months to meet her—because, you know, bones take time to heal and excuses need time to evolve.

Now, the million-rupee question was: what could the college actually do?

Suspend them? Nah, too much paperwork.

Warn them? Already done... thrice.

Pray for their enlightenment? Maybe.

So, after much "serious discussion," the grand outcome was—drumroll please—absolutely nothing.

The culprits walked away scot-free, heads held high, like victorious freedom fighters of the *Chhutti Le Lo Andolan* (“छुट्टी ले लो आंदोलन”).

Moral of the story? If you're going to have an excuse, make sure it doesn't involve an immortal grandmother. And if you're going to fall, make sure people are watching.

No matter how many times they were caught red-handed (sometimes even red-faced), these maestros of mischief had one ultimate weapon—a sheepish grin so disarming it could melt even the angriest principal. They'd spin tales so dramatic they made daily soaps look like documentaries... and somehow, *somehow*, they always walked away as if blessed by divine immunity.

Their excuses were the stuff of legend—half creativity, half pure audacity. One guy once claimed he missed a class test because of a **goat emergency**. Yes, apparently the goat's emotional well-being took precedence over college attendance. And shockingly... it worked! The teacher even nodded sympathetically, as if saying, “Ah yes, goats before grades. Understandable.”

The real comedy, though, wasn't the excuses—it was the administration's reaction. You'd expect thunder, lightning, maybe a suspension or at least a warning letter with *bold* and *underlined* words. But nope. Nothing. It was like watching a cat lazily observe mice hosting a full DJ night in the living room—utter chaos, zero consequences.

Meanwhile, those of us who still believed in things like fairness, accountability, and not blaming livestock for our mistakes... well, we were left shaking our heads, wondering if we were the fools for playing by the rules.

**Meanwhile**, over in the computer lab, things had taken a dramatic turn. It wasn't due to a software update or a power cut—those were always good for chaos—but because of a brand-new lab instructor who had crash-landed into our academic universe.

And let me tell you, the man earned a nickname faster than a joke goes viral.

Within days—no, hours—he was christened “**Tughlaq**.” A title so legendary, so loaded with historical baggage, it practically came with its own footnotes. It was a record-breaking feat. No other teacher had ever achieved nickname status so quickly. Most had to survive at least a semester, or a scandal, before we anointed them.

As for his real name? No idea. Didn’t care. “Tughlaq” fit him too perfectly—like destiny itself had taken one look at his face and said, “*Yup, that’s him.*” Much like the historical ruler, he was a walking, talking paradox—overconfident one second, utterly confusing the next, and always behaving like the universe had appointed him the chief minister of common sense (a position he clearly abused).

He’d storm into the lab with the swagger of a man about to unveil India’s next space mission, bark out orders like a general powered by triple-shot espresso, and then—out of nowhere—start rearranging everything. Seating plans, assignments, desktop icons... nothing was safe. It was like watching someone try to bring world peace by changing wallpaper settings.

And of course, we couldn’t look away. We were hooked—equal parts terrified and entertained—like audience members at a live performance titled “*Tughlaq: The Man, The Myth, The Mismanagement.*”

After much deep soul-searching (and a few fiery hostel debates fuelled by overboiled chai and suspiciously chewy samosas), I arrived at a poetic truth—my gut had been right all along.

Tughlaq wasn’t merely *odd*; he was a full-scale chaos generator in formal attire—a human tornado armed with a whiteboard marker and an unholy obsession with outdated software. If Microsoft ever needed a brand ambassador for Windows 98, this was their man.

His every command was less of an instruction and more of a social experiment gone wrong. Forget clarity—his “orders” were

like riddles wrapped in confusion, sprinkled with panic. Within days, he'd unintentionally ignited student uprisings of epic proportions—the kind usually reserved for cancelled college fests or the dreaded phrase, “surprise Monday test.”

In short, Tughlaq didn't run a lab. He ran a revolution. By accident.

Each batch of students—junior, senior, and ancient—was united in one universal feeling: *What the heck is going on?*

Tughlaq's reign had turned the computer lab into a battleground of broken logic and broken spirits.

But we weren't going down without a fight. We began preparing. Not with pitchforks or protest banners (yet), but with whispered strategies during lunch breaks, coded messages passed during lab sessions, and the occasional secret meeting in the canteen. We knew the only way to challenge the Great Digital Sultan was together. One wrong move, and we'd be exiled to spreadsheet purgatory for eternity.

Unity became our battle cry. Strategy was our shield. And sarcasm? That was our sword.

We didn't just want to survive Tughlaq's classes—we wanted to reclaim our lab, our sanity, and most importantly... our freedom to sit wherever the hell we wanted.

The uprising had begun. Quietly. Nerdily. But make no mistake—it was war.

Tughlaq was... how do I put this delicately? A *character*, and not the kind you casually forget. Picture a five-foot-tall dynamo packed with the muscle of a compact bodybuilder and the swagger of someone utterly convinced the universe personally owed him a standing ovation.

The moment he appeared, it wasn't just an entrance—it was a full-on invasion. Rooms didn't just welcome him; they surrendered. His voice? Imagine gravel being shoved through a rusty

megaphone, with a side of firecrackers. Loud, sharp, and impossible to ignore. You could try hiding under a table, stuffing earplugs in your ears, or even pretending to faint—but no, Tughlaq would still find you, like a caffeinated homing missile of chaos.

Then there was his head. Enormous. Like someone had stacked five jumbo-sized melons and decided, "Yep, that's the one!" It gave him a slightly bobblehead-like silhouette, which, combined with his Herculean walk and puffed-up chest, made him look like a cartoon general on parade.

But what truly cemented his legendary status was his wardrobe.

Every single day, Tughlaq dressed like a themed action figure—shirt, pants, belt, boots, and even his shoes, all the exact same colour. Maroon Monday. Teal Tuesday. Lavender (unfortunately) on Fridays. If you squinted from a distance, he looked like a walking paint swatch.

And then came the grand entrance.

He would pull into college on his ridiculously bright yellow scooter—a vehicle so loud in colour it probably had its own gravitational pull. But wait, the ritual didn't stop there. He'd dismount like a royal general inspecting his chariot, pull out a handkerchief with the solemnity of a religious rite, and proceed to **polish the scooter**. Every. Single. Day.

Rain or shine, war or peace, that scooter seat got more love than most students did during lab session.

It was weird. It was obsessive. It was peak Tughlaq.

And we? We couldn't look away.

Just when we thought Tughlaq had peaked with his colour-coordinated wardrobe and scooter seat-polishing ritual, he hit us with **The Sock Ban**.

Yes, you read that right.

In a move that could only be called *historic*—and by historic, I mean absurd beyond repair—he declared a total footwear ban in the computer lab. No shoes, no sandals, and—brace yourself—not even socks. According to Tughlaq, any kind of footwear supposedly messed with “electromagnetic productivity,” or some equally scientific-sounding nonsense that we were 99% sure he had just invented on the spot.

So there we were, tiptoeing across the cold, dusty tiles like a herd of extremely confused yoga students who had accidentally wandered into a computer lab instead of a meditation session. Every step felt like a high-stakes negotiation with the laws of physics... and with our dignity.

The atmosphere quickly shifted from “educational” to “spiritual retreat gone horribly wrong.”

But Tughlaq wasn’t done. No, sir.

He followed it up with another gem of a rule: boys and girls would now sit **separately**. Not just separate rows—we’re talking **opposite corners of the lab**. As if any academic mischief was going to erupt while we were busy battling viruses (both digital and potentially fungal, thanks to the barefoot policy).

The once vibrant lab, filled with banter, group projects, and shared snacks, now felt like a scene from an emotional post-war film. Students shuffled in silently, sat stiffly apart, and tried not to breathe too loudly lest it violate some newly invented lab ordinance.

Our beloved space of curiosity and caffeine-fuelled collaboration had become a **shoeless, joyless, gender-segregated zone of confusion**.

We weren’t just learning computers anymore. We were learning the full meaning of suffering—one barefoot step at a time.

In a masterstroke of silent rebellion, a few of our sharper—and let’s face it, slightly unhinged—classmates **stole the computer mouse**. Not one. Not two. **Several**.

Yes, **mouse**—those humble, harmless little clicky creatures that helped us survive boring assignments and sneakily play Minesweeper when no one was looking.

The lab, already ruled like a boot camp by the mighty Tughlaq, suddenly found itself in chaos. One day, a mouse was missing. The next, two more vanished. By the end of the week, it was a full-blown digital rodent apocalypse—except this time, the mouse didn't run away... **they were taken.**

Teachers launched an investigation that could've rivalled a CID episode. The staff sniffed around like hounds on a scent trail. Interrogations happened. Notices were issued. Threats were implied. But the culprits? **Ghosts. Legends. Shadows in the server room.**

Of course, we all knew the truth. The masterminds behind this operation were from among us—our friends, our roommates, our very own brothers-in-bunks. We didn't *say* it out loud, but our eyes betrayed us. The smirks. The raised eyebrows. The mysterious clinks of mouse balls in pockets. It was like living inside a slow-burn mystery novel... only with more bare feet and lab chairs.

And oh, how we **loved** it.

The theft became the unofficial gossip currency of the semester.

"How did they pull it off?"

"Where are they hiding them?"

"Do you think Tughlaq knows?"

"Bro... are they building a secret lab?!"

We didn't have the answers, but we had the thrill. The quiet admiration. The warm camaraderie of a classroom united not by a syllabus—but by silent applause for a prank so bold, it became legend.

No arrests. No confessions. Just missing mouse population... and the smug satisfaction of a student body that had scored one against the Empire.

As fate would have it—and it usually does when chaos is involved—things quickly spiralled out of control.

One fine morning, Tughlaq summoned the entire class to the computer lab with the grim expression of a man about to deliver a national emergency broadcast. His voice, already grating on a good day, now carried the full weight of what we could only describe as **unhinged tyranny**.

Without so much as a preamble or a chance for us to plead innocent, he dropped the bomb: **“Each of you will pay a fine of ₹1000.”**

We blinked. We looked at each other.

Was this a joke?

A skit?

An April Fool’s prank?

Nope. He was dead serious. The man was ready to bankrupt an entire batch over **missing computer mouse**.

For context, a brand-new mouse barely cost ₹400. And that too with a warranty and probably a free CD. But here we were—being collectively billed double for a electronic rodent-related crime no one admitted to. It was financial overkill, bordering on comedy.

The room fell silent. Not the usual “Tughlaq is ranting again” silence, but the kind of silence that happens just before **a rebellion**.

Murmurs began to bubble. Angry whispers. Calculations of how many samosas or canteen chai ₹1000 could buy. Someone in the back muttered, “Even NASA doesn’t fine this much for lost shuttle.”

For weeks, we had danced delicately around his commandments—barefoot, obedient, and terrified, like monks trapped in a binary code monastery. We’d tolerated his seating



apartheid, watched him polish his scooter with the devotion of a temple priest giving aarti to a deity on two wheels. But this? This was it. The final insult. You can rob broke college students of sleep, dignity, and Maggi packets—but try charging us for *imaginary rats*, and congratulations—you’ve just unlocked chaos mode.

A spark had been lit. And Tughlaq—bless him—had no idea what was coming.

The moment we heard that **170 students had each been fined ₹1000**, our brains did some lightning-fast math—because when injustice hits, nothing sharpens your arithmetic like rage.

**₹1,70,000.**

That’s right. One lakh seventy thousand rupees. Enough to buy **brand-new computers**, high-speed internet, ergonomic chairs, and probably still have enough left over for a celebratory round of samosas for the entire college.

Naturally, we weren’t having it.

This wasn’t about the money anymore. It was about *honour*. *Dignity*. *Footwear rights*. We stood up—not just on our bare feet, but on principle—and collectively declared: **“We will not pay.”**

Now, we fully expected some scolding, a warning, maybe even a moral lecture delivered at Tughlaq volume. What we didn’t expect was the **nuclear option**.

Tughlaq, backed by the ever-silent and conveniently absent administration, struck back with a dramatic ban:

**“You are hereby not allowed to attend classes.”**

Just like that, 170 students were turned into academic exiles. It was official—we were **at war**.

The campus divided like battle ground of Kurukshetra.

On one side: us, the noble, unfairly fined rebels.

On the other: Tughlaq and his loyal few, holding the lab hostage with unjust decrees and polished scooter seats.

What had started with a few missing mouse had exploded into a **full-scale student uprising**. And we weren't backing down. Not until justice was served—or at least until someone acknowledged that ₹1000 could buy a decent second hand cycle and not just vanish into the mysterious “fine fund.”

We were no longer just students. We were a **movement**.

And this movement?

Had just begun.

The next morning, we marched toward class with the fiery determination of revolutionaries... only to walk straight into a scene that could've been lifted from a wild college-version of a WWE smackdown.

It started with a simple spark—some students, clearly born without an understanding of *personal space* or *basic human decency*, started jostling and shoving. And unfortunately for Tughlaq, our resident dictator-in-boots, he was right in the eye of the storm.

Before anyone could shout “Ctrl + Z!”, a group of boys grabbed Tughlaq and—rather dramatically—**launched him onto a bench**. It wasn't exactly graceful. Picture a sack of potatoes mid-flight, with a hint of melodrama.

Cue chaos.

Fists flew, tempers exploded, and the lab transformed into an unsanctioned fight club. I, trying to survive without becoming a human punching bag, found myself caught in the crossfire—and *RIP*—there went my shirt. A clean tear, right across the side, like some kind of tragic battle scar from a war I hadn't even volunteered for.

And yet, somehow, **we won**.

Tughlaq was shaken, the crowd was fired up, and for a brief, shining moment, it felt like justice had been body-slammed into existence.

But victory was short-lived. By lunchtime, word had reached the principal faster than gossip travels in hostel bathrooms. No one asked for our side of the story. No one cared that Tughlaq had basically declared martial law weeks ago. Nope.

**Suspension: three days. All of us. No discussion.**

Just a curt announcement, like we'd been naughty schoolkids caught stealing chalk.

It felt unfair.

It *was* unfair.

But deep down, as I stared at my torn shirt like a soldier examining his uniform after war, I knew one thing for sure: This battle might've cost us three days... but the revolution? Oh, it was just getting warmed up.

In just six months—yes, a grand total of one semester—we somehow managed to become legends on campus. Not the kind with medals or certificates, mind you. No, we earned our fame the old-fashioned way: through a colourful collection of suspensions, scuffles, and sheer stupidity.

By the end of that magical half-year, we had racked up two (or was it three?) suspensions, depending on which dean was counting. We'd also managed to stir up no less than five or six fights—one of which involved a lab instructor and a broken monitor. That particular incident got us our own chapter in the unofficial college gossip manual.

Soon, our names were being whispered across canteens, corridors, and staffrooms alike. New students were warned about us like we were local goons: "Don't mess with them. They once made the computer lab look like a WWE ring."

It had all started innocently enough. A bunch of socially clueless boys just trying to make friends. But somewhere between bunked classes, rooftop cricket, and arguments over Maggi recipes, things spiralled. Fast.

By the time we realized we were no longer just students but walking cautionary tales, it was too late. We weren't famous. We were *infamous*. And somehow, we wore that title like a badge of honour—shiny, slightly dented, and totally earned.

The day our suspension ended felt like parole. We strutted back onto campus as if we were war heroes returning from exile—minus the medals, plus a little ego bruising. The sun seemed brighter, the canteen samosas crispier, and for the first time in weeks, even the morning lectures felt almost... tolerable. Almost.

For the next three weeks, life was weirdly peaceful. Classes happened. No one got punched. We didn't get called into the dean's office—not even once. People had started talking to us like we were regular students again and not the subjects of a viral cautionary tale titled *“What Not to Do in College”*.

But beneath all that calm, something else was brewing. And no, it wasn't just another badly made hostel chai with extra ilaichi(cardamom).

You see, while everyone thought we'd turned over a new leaf, we were quietly stewing in the memory of what had gone down. The shame. The finger-pointing. The way people had looked at us like we were stray dogs who'd walked into a 5-star lobby. That sting hadn't gone anywhere. It had just been...marinated.

Revenge—not the dramatic, soap-opera kind, but the satisfying, low-key variety—was calling. We didn't want to burn down buildings or start a fight club. But we *did* want to make a point. A well-aimed, slightly mischievous, definitely unforgettable point. Because some things in life deserve closure. And for us, closure came with a plan.

And then, it happened—the kind of day that feels like it’s been dropped into your lap by the universe with a cheeky wink. Word spread like butter on hot parathas: “*Class is dismissed after one p.m. Faculty function, full day drama, no lectures after lunch!*” It was the kind of announcement that made even the most dedicated students casually forget their lab coats somewhere and vanish like magicians.

For us, it felt like destiny had finally remembered our address. After weeks of waiting, sulking, and plotting, here was our golden ticket—a free afternoon handed to us on a silver plate, wrapped in confetti, and signed off by fate itself.

The campus was unusually quiet. Most of the good kids were off attending the faculty celebration, probably clapping for someone getting an award for *Most Consistent Attendance*. Others had already disappeared into their weekend plans. The field was clear. Literally.

We looked around, and that familiar spark returned to our eyes—the one that usually preceded decisions that ended in either glory or a disciplinary notice. No teachers. No tattletales. No witnesses. Just us and a wide-open afternoon begging to be misused.

And just like that, a plan began to form. A quiet jailbreak. A bold escape from the clutches of algebra and ethics lectures. Adventure awaited, just beyond the last period. We didn’t know where we were headed—but one thing was certain: We weren’t going to waste this escape on something sensible.

After much heated debate, dramatic hand-waving, and a lot of pacing around like overthinking villains in a low-budget movie, we finally reached a unanimous decision: *it was time*. Time to serve the long-overdue dose of poetic justice we’d been dreaming about since our last humiliating run-in with Tughlaq.

Now, for context, our earlier attempts to take a stand against him had all flopped harder than a bad dance move at a wedding. We’d tried reasoning. We’d tried retaliation. Heck, we even considered karma (but it was taking too long). Every path we took

ended with us looking like fools while he strutted around like the self-declared sultan of the college. So this time, we changed tactics.

We weren't going after him directly. Oh no. That hadn't worked. Instead, we were going for something closer to his heart than his ego—his beloved scooter.

Yes, *that* scooter. The one he polished daily like it was a temple idol. The one he spoke to with more tenderness than he ever showed to humans. To Tughlaq, that scooter wasn't just a vehicle. It was a soulmate on two wheels.

And so, our mission was clear: Operation Scooter Strike. It wasn't just revenge—it was art. A symbolic gesture. A heartfelt response to all the trauma, tantrums, and terrible insults we'd endured.

With fire in our bellies and a plan in our heads, we prepared for execution. This time, it wasn't about shouting or fighting. This time, it was personal.

And hilarious.

To pull off our masterpiece, we moved like a covert SWAT team—if SWAT teams wore one week old underwear and socks smelled faintly of dead mice. A determined squad of boys and girls took up their positions around Tughlaq's prized scooter, now standing innocently under a flickering parking lot light like 'his master' hadn't caused us months of emotional damage.

We closed in from all sides, like a highly classified military operation—except our arsenal consisted of a blade, a couple of permanent markers, a divider, and absolutely zero sense of shame.

Only the chosen few were part of this elite task force—handpicked not for courage or intelligence, but for their Olympic-level talent in lying through their teeth when caught.

Their mission? Elegant yet evil. Sophisticated yet stupid. To pull off a prank so sneakily savage that even Tughlaq's ancestors would feel a mild emotional tremor.

The air buzzed with anticipation. Hearts pounded. Palms sweated. Someone sneezed and got immediately shushed. It was go-time.

we had chosen our path: *hit him where it hurts—the scooter*. Not physically, of course. We weren't monsters. But emotionally? Oh yes. That scooter wasn't just a mode of transport—it was his girlfriend. His soulmate. His one true love on wheels.

And so, as the campus slumbered and the street dogs howled in approval, we prepared to unleash Operation Scooter Vengeance.

Because sometimes, revenge doesn't come in the form of a fight. Sometimes, it comes wrapped in glitter, confusion, and a whole lot of lipstick.

Like a scene straight out of a low-budget action film, the scooter met its doom. The seat, once proud and cushiony, was ripped apart with the kind of aggression usually reserved for tearing exam results. One swift slash from a well-wielded blade, and the poor seat's fabric gave way like a biscuit in hot chai. The sponge inside exploded out like it had been waiting years to escape. It flew everywhere—on the ground, in the air, even on someone's shoulder like a weird yellow parrot.

And then came the scavengers of our class, boys who could spot free stuff faster than the canteen auntie spots a fake coupon. They descended like bargain-hunters at a clearance sale, scooping up bits of sponge with the gleam of ambition in their eyes. Apparently, torn scooter foam makes for excellent bike-polishing material. Who knew?

Meanwhile, two brave souls moved in on the next phase of destruction. The scooter's accelerator and clutch wires—those delicate veins of mechanical life—were yanked out with all the tenderness of a caveman pulling roots from the earth. They dangled for a moment, then were unceremoniously tossed aside.

And just like that, it was done.

Tughlaq's mighty steed, once the envy of every fresher with walking shoes, now stood like a ghost of its former self. Broken. Defeated. Utterly useless. No roar of the engine. No proud vroom. Just silence... and a lot of sponge.

We didn't just prank him—we'd staged a full-blown Shakespearean tragedy for two wheels.

And somewhere in the shadows, we watched. Proud. United. Slightly scared of getting caught.

But mostly proud.

Just when we thought the scooter had suffered enough, we hit a small speed bump—literally.

The tires.

We had hoped to remove them entirely, roll them away like trophies, maybe even hide them in someone's hostel cupboard for dramatic effect. But alas, they were clamped on tighter than the dean's expression during disciplinary hearings.

Enter: our resident genius, Gulab Singh—a proud export from the Mathematics Department. We called him *Gulabo* out of love, and the mild fear that he might one day calculate our downfall.

With the calm focus of a brain surgeon and the mischief level of a cartoon villain, Gulabo whipped out his geometry box—yes, the same one meant for constructing angles and pretending to pay attention in math class. Armed with a compass, divider, and the kind of dedication usually reserved for board exams, he knelt beside the helpless tire like Michelangelo about to sculpt.

One by one, he poked.

Not wildly. Not randomly. No, sir. This was artisanal destruction—around 50 to 60 perfectly spaced, lovingly executed punctures. It wasn't vandalism. It was geometry.

They were beyond repair, beyond recognition, and—most importantly—beyond Tughlaq's wildest nightmares.



The scooter had been officially retired from active duty.

And all it took was a divider, some quiet determination, and a disturbingly deep grudge.

Just when we thought things couldn't get any crazier, Amit showed up—swinging an iron cutting blade like a man who'd binged one too many action movies.

His eyes sparkled with mischief, his voice dripped with excitement, and his idea? Pure, unfiltered madness.

"Listen," he said, practically vibrating, "what if we cut the handlebar? Snap it clean in half."

Now, the mental image of Tughlaq soaring through the air like a malfunctioning pigeon was comedy gold—but also terrifying. This wasn't a prank anymore; it would be a trap that could backfire. If we cut his scooter's handlebar in two, Tughlaq might take it as a threat and could file a serious complaint against us.

But reason never stood a chance. The jury was unanimous: forget the handlebar, we'd just finish the job by deflating the tires. Except "deflating" quickly turned into "executing with samurai precision." Swift, clean slices.

And just like that, the once-mighty scooter stood there—flat, broken, and going absolutely nowhere. A tragic sculpture of speed and ego, brought down by geometry tools, hostel justice, and a vendetta gone beautifully petty.

After we'd thoroughly inspected the remains of the scooter—an inspection that felt more like a forensic crime scene investigation than anything else—we took a collective breath. The scooter, once full of life and throttle, now lay there in silence. Flat tires, gutted seat, tangled wires. If scooters had souls, this one had definitely moved on.

**"After we'd paid our last respects to the fallen machine, someone finally whispered the obvious: we hadn't just sabotaged it—we'd straight-up murdered it."**

And just like that, we headed off—not in guilt or regret, but with the slow-motion swagger of heroes walking away from an explosion. Our mission complete, our spirits high, we gathered around our usual canteen table like war veterans after a successful campaign.

This wasn't just a snack break. No, this was a full-blown emotional debrief.

Between bites of samosas and sips of watery cola, we shared everything—our favourite moments of the operation, the near-misses, the way Gulabo's divider should be preserved in a museum, and Amit's rejected Tughlaq-flying fantasy. We laughed, we argued, we re-enacted bits of it with exaggerated flair. It was glorious.

As the teachers' party began to fizzle out like the last sparks of a dying bonfire, the staff started drifting out—happily full, slightly tipsy on too much rasmalai(sweet milk product), and unaware of the drama about to unfold just a few steps away.

And then... came Tughlaq.

He approached his scooter with the casual air of a man ready to ride into the sunset. But just as he reached it, he stopped. Completely. Utterly. As if someone had hit the pause button on his remote.

He didn't move. Not a twitch. Not a blink.

He just stood there, staring at the mechanical corpse of his once-glorious ride. We watched from a distance, half-hidden behind a tree, frozen mid-samosa bite.

Seconds passed. Then minutes.

Still, no movement.

The stillness was so intense, we actually started to worry. Was he okay? Was this some sort of emotional breakdown? A scooter-induced stroke? A slow-motion heart attack? His face, usually so animated with confusion and complaints, was now a blank canvas of

horror. He looked like someone had just told him his scooter had eloped with a Pulsar.

We exchanged nervous glances.

Should we go check on him?

Should we call the authority?

Should we run?

The man hadn't even touched the scooter yet, but the energy was intense—like a detective stumbling upon a crime scene where the victim is... *his dreams*.

It was strange. It was dramatic. It was kind of beautiful. But mostly, it was terrifying.

We had no idea what was coming next.

But one thing was clear: the legend of this moment was just beginning.

Santosh, never one to let a tense moment go unmocked, leaned in and whispered, "He's probably trying to decide whether to bury it like a fallen soldier... or give it a proper send-off by dunking it in the Ganges with full funeral rites."

We burst out laughing—quietly, of course. It was a solemn tragedy for Tughlaq, but for us, it was starting to feel like a dark comedy with really expensive props.

Just as we'd predicted—almost like we'd scripted the whole thing—a cart was promptly summoned to collect the fallen hero of the day: Tughlaq's scooter.

And because we were committed to the role of helpful, innocent bystanders, we even offered to assist. "Need a hand?" we chirped, cheerfully lifting the scooter's broken remains onto the cart like pallbearers at a very confusing funeral.

But as we worked, we could feel it—Tughlaq's eyes on us.

Not blinking. Not moving. Just... burning.

The kind of stare that makes you question all your life choices and maybe even your bloodline.

Leaning in, Mani whispered, “Bro... do you feel that? He’s not just looking *at* us. He’s looking *through* us. Like he’s reading our browser history. Like he wants to roast our souls and serve them with chutney.”

We nodded, laughing nervously, trying to shake off the chill his laser-eyes were giving us.

Somewhere between guilt and mischief, we caught each other’s eyes—and that one shared look said it all:

We were *definitely* not getting away with this quietly.

I shrugged and said, “Please. Tughlaq’s digestion isn’t built for rage like ours. One more encounter with us, and he’ll be popping antacids like candy. If he’s got even half a brain, he’ll steer clear of our orbit.”

The group chuckled, nodding in agreement. Tughlaq might’ve stared into our souls yesterday, but deep down we knew—he wasn’t ready for another round of our brand of chaos.

Not without a helmet. And a therapist.

We slowly walked up to him, our expressions carefully arranged somewhere between saintly sympathy and Oscar-worthy seriousness.

“Sir,” I began, placing a hand on my heart, “we just wanted to say... we’re truly sorry for your loss.”

Mani chimed in, nodding solemnly, “It was a *remarkable* scooter. May its spirit roll on forever... in that great parking lot in the sky.”

Another added, “For that which is lost... cannot return. Unless it’s towed and repaired. But in this case, probably not.”

We all stood there, heads bowed like mourners at a scooter-themed funeral, giving the moment the gravity it deserved. Because

for Tughlaq, it wasn't just a vehicle. It was his chariot, his confidant, his one true companion through college lanes, potholes, and petrol hikes.

And though its tires were slashed, wires pulled, and seat... violently ventilated—it had carried him proudly till it's very last wheeze.

We let the silence stretch, honouring not just the machine, but the memories.

Behind our sad faces, of course, we were holding back laughter like schoolkids at a prayer meeting.

But in that moment, standing next to a broken scooter and a heartbroken man, we understood one thing clearly:

Machines rust. Seats tear. But memories?

Those ride with you forever. Especially when you're the ones who caused them.

Tughlaq knew it—we were the obvious culprits. No detective work needed. Our guilt practically glowed in the air like a neon sign that read *"Idiots did this!"* The crime scene had our fingerprints, our style, and probably even a few of our snack crumbs. But to be fair, even Tughlaq had the self-awareness (a rare event in itself) to realise that he wasn't entirely innocent either. After all, it takes two to tango—and in this case, one to mess up and three to make it legendary.

He didn't shout. Didn't storm into the principal's office waving broken clutch wires. He simply stood there, silent as a statue, processing the grief of his dearly departed scooter. A lesser man might've plotted revenge. But not Tughlaq—not this time.

Instead, he did something unexpected... something downright mature.

So he stood still. Thought long. Squinted into the middle distance like a philosopher in a faded government ad. And then, he made his move.

**"He decided to buy a new scooter."**

Practical? Yes. Strategic? Absolutely.

Yep. Clean slate. New wheels. No foam flying through the air. No bent rods. No tearful goodbyes.

Why? Because he knew. He *knew* that if he didn't make the smart move and tried to seek revenge—or worse, waited around for Sir to gift him a new ride—we'd just get *too* inspired. And let's face it, there are only so many times a group of un-employed, over-caffeinated boys can come up with creative scooter sabotage plans before the authority calls security.

By choosing peace over payback, Tughlaq broke the cycle.

**"A week later, Tughlaq rolled back into college on a brand-new scooter—same model, same colour, as if nothing had ever happened."**

## CHAPTER 6

### The Monk's Dog and A Rose Queen

Kumar was the glue in our little gang of misfits—the kind of guy who made you feel like everything was going to be okay, even when your world was clearly on fire. We were close. Like *finish-each-other's-samosas* close. But I loved Kumar like a brother, he clearly loved me like a full-time nanny.

Honestly, the guy was a walking, talking, emotionally available Swiss Army knife. Whether I was sick, sulking, or just plain skipping class out of existential dread (which happened more than I'd admit), Kumar would show up at my place like a mother hen with a mission. He'd bring notes, updates, and sometimes snacks—which, let's be honest, healed more than just academic gaps.

His concern wasn't casual. It was full-blown parental. He'd visit to check if I'd eaten, slept, or hydrated—as if I was a houseplant with anxiety. Our friends didn't even bother with sarcasm; they just straight-up started calling him my “Mummy.” And not in a mocking way either. More like a badge of honour. If I had a cold, Kumar had Vicks. If I had exam stress, Kumar had color-coded notes and a moral support playlist.

But beneath the jokes and his over-the-top caretaker routine was a friendship deeper than Babu Rao's well in Hera-Feri movie . We didn't just have each other's backs—we had each other's lives stitched into the same mad, colourful quilt. And Kumar, well... he was the thread that kept it all from unravelling.

The moment someone dropped the word “Mummy” into the conversation, the entire room froze—not in shock, but in that slow, knowing way a group of people does when the truth just walked in without knocking. Everyone's eyes instinctively shifted toward

Kumar, who, by now, was practically sipping his chai with the calm authority of someone who *knew* he ran the emotional household.

No one had to explain it. There was no confusion, no follow-up questions—just a collective nod, like we were all attending a reunion of kids raised by the same overly concerned college mom. And that mom was Kumar.

It wasn't just a nickname anymore; it was a sacred title, earned over semesters of care packages, unsolicited life advice, and the occasional forehead temperature check. The word "Mummy" didn't just describe Kumar. It *was* Kumar—stitched right into the group's memory like a stubborn label you can't peel off a shirt.

It started out like any other lazy afternoon on campus—with a cricket match on the college lawn and egos flying higher than the actual ball. Our gang was in full form, sledging with flair, playing with the passion of people who had no business aiming for the CPL(college premier league), but were emotionally convinced otherwise.

Everything was going great—sun shining, jokes flying, sixes landing in neighbouring districts—until a rival group, who clearly had the emotional stability of a broken pressure cooker, decided to pick a fight. Apparently, our six-hitting skills had bruised more than just their egos.

One thing led to another (as it always does when testosterone meets cricket), and soon words were flying faster than the ball ever had—some of them so creative they could've earned royalties on a comedy channel.

And then... it happened.

The *incident*.

In a burst of red-faced rage, one of their guys lunged forward and *shoved Kumar*.

Yes. **Shoved. Kumar.**



Time froze. Birds stopped mid-flight. A distant dog howled. Somewhere, Sachin probably felt a disturbance in the Force. Even the wind seemed to pause, waiting to see if this man had just written his own obituary.

You don't just go around manhandling Kumar. That's like shoving the class monitor, the team medic, and your emotional support animal—all rolled into one.

Gasps echoed. Bats were gripped tighter. And then someone, in what can only be described as the most poorly timed attempt to escalate things, shouted, "He insulted Bhuvan's *Mummy*!"

Silence.

Followed by chaos.

Now here's the kicker: *Kumar* was Bhuvan's "Mummy." Everyone knew it. But try explaining that to a field full of hot-headed hundred-somethings with cricket bats and pride issues.

Suddenly, everyone was yelling. Some were defending Kumar's honour, others were just yelling because that's what you do in a college fight. It was less about cricket now and more about reputations, mothers—both real and honorary—and who could shout louder without actually throwing a punch.

Within seconds, the whole vibe went from "friendly cricket match" to "Breaking News: Chaos on Campus!" like someone had flipped a action switch. And right on cue—like bees to honey, students came swarming in.

Now, if you've never seen engineers reacting to a fight, it's a mix of Sherlock Holmes-level guesswork and full-blown conspiracy theories. Someone in the crowd, with zero facts and a PhD in jumping to conclusions, loudly declared, "अरे भाई, भुवन की असली माँ उनसे मिलने आयीं — और किसी ऑटो चालक ने उन्हें धक्का दे दिया।" ("Hey brother, Bhuvan's real mother had come to meet him — and some auto driver pushed her!")

Boom. That was it.

That one wild rumour hit the crowd like electricity in a bucket of high caffeine. Within minutes, a heroic rescue squad materialized—complete with hockey sticks, furious expressions, and absolutely no context.

Now imagine me—right in the middle of all this—with one side screaming about disrespect, another side ready to reenact *Gangs of dongri*, and me trying to explain, “Guys, it’s not about my real mom! He’s just my *Kumar*—our in-house emotional caregiver!”

But no one was listening. The air was thick with testosterone, misplaced chivalry, and a strange mix of engineering rage and moral duty. Trying to step in at that point felt like standing between two giant grinding millstones—whichever side you leaned toward, you’d still get crushed into dust.

And there stood Kumar, watching this mythological-level misunderstanding unfold, sipping water and quietly muttering, “God knows what!”

The rival team clearly hadn’t read the manual on campus survival, because Rule #1 was simple: **don’t mess with Mummy**.

Now, to be fair, this “Mummy” didn’t wear a saree or pack tiffin. No, this one wore college hoodies, walked with a mild limp from last semester’s library chair mishap, and answered to the name *Kumar*. But make no mistake—his maternal energy was legendary.

Just when the chaos hit its peak, a boy named Samrat made his grand entry onto the field.

The scene lit a fire inside him—like Sunny Deol possessed his soul. “No questions asked” mode activated. He grabbed a cold drink bottle from the nearby canteen and *wham!*—smashed it straight on a guy’s head.

But oh no, our man wasn’t done yet! Next move—he lifted the *entire crate* and brought it down on the poor fellow’s forehead. *Thud!* And then—silence! Blood spurted out like someone had just turned on the fountain.

That was it. Instant mood shift. One second we were ready to recreate *Mahabharat: The Street Edition*—and the next, silence. The fight evaporated faster than Maggi in boiling water. Everyone froze, mouths half-open, cricket bats hanging midair like confused props.

No one knew what to do. We just stood there, staring at Samrat, silently asking, “*Bro... was that part of the plan? Was this necessary, or are you just auditioning for a crime show?*”

And then, as if some divine realization struck all at once, both groups—who were ready to break each other’s bones a minute ago—suddenly became brothers in humanity. Rivalries forgotten, egos parked aside, we turned into one big rescue squad.

In a blink, everyone was sprinting toward the hospital like extras in a patriotic movie. The guy got admitted, treatment started, and for once, every brain cell screamed the same thought: “**First, save him....**”

And then—miraculously—the boy recovered. Like a hero making a dramatic comeback after the interval, he opened his eyes, blinked twice, and was *back*.

The entire ward practically turned into a festival. Someone shouted “He’s fine!” and suddenly it felt like we’d won the World Cup. Even the nurse looked mildly impressed (or maybe just tired of us, idiots camping there since morning).

Just like that, the boy came back to life—literally and emotionally—while we stood around, pretending we hadn’t almost started a full-scale war over a game of cricket.

But the real drama was still waiting. Next day, Samrat got a call to the principal’s office—and we got dragged along too.

The principal, fuming, asked,

“Why did you hit him so badly?”

Poor Samrat just stood there, dumbfounded. He didn’t even know why the fight had started in the first place! His philosophy was simple: *see chaos—start swinging*.

Watching his clueless face, we were all dying to laugh—holding it in the way you do when someone farts in class.

But deep down... our respect for Samrat skyrocketed.

In the end, we realized something kind of beautiful: motherhood isn't about gender or biology. It's about **showing up**. And Kumar, with his chronic concern and bulletproof loyalty, had shown up for us every single time.

So yeah, our "Mummy" was Kumar. And we wouldn't have had it any other way.

Kumar had a sister. Her name was **Ruba**—and unlike Kumar, Ruba came with sharp brains, not-calm but confident, and a smile that could short-circuit your focus mid-sentence.

At first, she was just another familiar face in our academic circle—smart, dependable, always the one who actually read the group project brief. But then, somewhere between PowerPoint slides and endless cups of canteen chai, I started noticing... things.

Like how her smile would stretch a little wider when I cracked a bad joke (and I *always* crack bad jokes). Or how, during group discussions, her eyes would occasionally linger on me a beat too long—like she was either extremely fond of me or deeply concerned I hadn't done my readings (both were plausible).

At first, I dismissed it as imagination—wishful thinking brought on by too much caffeine and not enough sleep. But then came the signs. The way she always found a seat next to me in the library. The way she remembered my class schedule better than I did. The way she once saved the last samosa for me—and trust me, *that* was love language at its purest.

Slowly, it began to dawn on me—this wasn't just academic camaraderie or her being friendly for Kumar's sake. No, this had a *vibe*. A soft, slow-blooming vibe. Like a silent rom-com unfolding between textbooks and semester stress.

Now, it wasn't like I was completely oblivious. Anyone with functioning eyesight (and at least one ear tuned into college gossip) could tell that **Ruba** was... interested. Her smiles were warmer, her questions oddly personal, and she once even laughed at one of my *puns*. A pun!

But here's the thing—I just couldn't see her that way. Not because Ruba wasn't lovely—she absolutely was. Smart, thoughtful, the kind of girl who somehow managed to be both graceful and terrifyingly good at studies. But the real concern was... **Kumar**.

Yes, *that* Kumar. My classmate, my imaginary mom. Falling for his sister felt like walking into a room labelled "**EMOTIONAL LANDMINE—ENTER AND DIE.**" There was a big neon boundary line in my brain that read: "**Friend's Sister: Do Not Cross**", and I had no desire to test what lay on the other side.

And then, there was another very important detail: I hadn't developed romantic feelings for *anyone*. Not the girls in my class, not the girls in other departments, not even the mysterious girl in the library who wore glasses and never returned my pen.

But before anyone starts drafting conspiracy theories—no, I wasn't secretly in love with a boy either. My heart didn't beat faster for anyone except, maybe, **exam results** and **fresh bottle of 'old monk'**.

The truth? I was already in a committed relationship—with **my books**. And occasionally, with my notebook full of weird short stories and half-finished poems that no one ever read.

Romance? Flirting? Dates?

Please—I barely had time to flirt with **sleep**.

Out of nowhere, Ruba's attention did a full 180. No, this was the kind of look that made me wonder if I had something on my face—or worse, if she had finally smelled *me*.

Back in college, I had a bit of a **toxic romance with tobacco**. Cigarettes and I were in a committed relationship—one that my

lungs deeply disapproved of. My clothes always carried that unmistakable eau de *ashtray deluxe*, a scent that could knock a pigeon unconscious mid-flight.

Not Ruba.

She plopped herself next to me every chance she got, like it was her favourite reserved seat on the Titanic. And then came the questions.

“Why do you smoke?”

“Do you even *like* the taste?”

“Is it stress? Image? Or are you just collecting future hospital bills?”

It wasn’t nagging, though. It was weirdly... gentle. Like she was genuinely trying to *understand*. Like I was some mysterious novel she couldn’t put down, even if Chapter 1 smelled like burnt tar.

And honestly? It threw me off.

No one had ever been that curious about my *habits*. Usually, people judged, lectured, or pinched their noses dramatically.

But Ruba? She leaned in, eyes wide, like she was studying a slightly broken yet oddly fascinating science experiment—and wanted to fix it.

Her attention was both flattering and uncomfortable. She wasn’t trying to change me exactly, but her presence made me question *why* I’d chosen this path in the first place. For the first time, I started seeing my smoking not as a casual act of rebellion, but as something that maybe—just maybe—wasn’t as cool or harmless as I told myself.

And that’s when it hit me: Ruba wasn’t just interested in *what* I did. She wanted to understand *why* I did it.

It was unexpected. It was disarming.

And yeah—it was kind of amazing.

"Why do you smoke again?"

"Did you just light one before coming here? You smell like a walking cigarette ad—without the cool music," Ruba would say, nose crinkling slightly but eyes full of that familiar teasing sparkle.

And that, dear reader, was my cue.

With the smugness of a failed magician revealing a trick no one asked for, I'd lean in just a little and whisper, "Ah, but it's not a cigarette today. It's Ganja... weed, Maybe opium. Want a puff?"

I'd say it in the most dramatic tone possible, like I was offering her a golden ticket to Willy Wonka's weedworld.

She'd pause.

Then came one of two reactions—either an exaggerated eye roll that could sweep the entire classroom clean or a burst of laughter loud enough to make everyone wonder if someone had finally gone mad from C++.

It became a thing between us. My stupid, outrageous comments, and her brilliant takedowns.

"Wow," she'd say once, "you should open a rehab centre—*for your sense of humour.*"

Another time: "One day you'll say that and someone will call the cops. Hopefully me."

Some people pass notes. We traded sarcasm and fake narcotics. And while I never actually stopped smoking during that phase, I did start showing up with a little more perfume and a lot more smart comebacks—just in case Ruba came looking for another round.

Whenever Ruba got mad—*really* mad—it was like watching a monsoon roll in on a perfectly sunny day. One moment we'd be chatting like usual, and the next? Boom. The temperature in the room dropped by ten degrees, and she'd storm out like an emotionally hurt hurricane. Her footsteps echoed with purpose. Her

departure was loud, dramatic, and just short of needing background music from a theatre-drama.

And me? I'd just sit there.

Did I run after her, yelling heartfelt apologies? Nope.

Did I whisper poetic lines to win her back? Definitely not.

Did I... stare blankly at the ceiling fan while pretending to be deep and mysterious? That was more my vibe.

It's not that I didn't care. I did. But sometimes, I was just too tangled in my own overthinking to untangle hers. My mind was like a crowded railway station of thoughts—noisy, confusing, and perpetually delayed.

But here's the magical part: she always came back.

Every. Single. Time.

One minute she was gone, and the next, she'd be plopping down beside me again as if the emotional tornado from ten minutes ago had never happened. No grand speeches. No dramatic accusations. Just, "So, what were you saying before you started being an idiot?"

And like that, we'd be back. Mid-conversation. Mid-sarcasm. Mid-us.

Sure, we had our share of emotional tsunamis, but Ruba? She was like one of those rubber balls—no matter how hard life threw her, she bounced right back. Usually at my head.

And honestly? I wouldn't have had it any other way.

After months of friendship, a hundred shared jokes, and maybe three too many borrowed notebooks, I figured I'd finally earned the right to have *that* conversation with Kumar. You know—the "hey bro, I think your sister kinda likes me" talk. The kind that could either make or break a friendship. Or at least lead to mild physical harm.



So, one sunny afternoon with absolutely no backup plan, I decided to open my mouth and let destiny do its thing.

“Listen, Kumar...” I started, trying to sound casual, like I was asking to borrow a pen and not, in fact, touching the nuclear button of our friendship.

“Your sister, Ruba... I think she might have a little bit of a... um... thing for me.”

Now, when I say Kumar didn’t flinch, I don’t mean he was calm. I mean he froze like Windows 98 in the middle of a software update. His eyes narrowed, his jaw did this slow grind like he was chewing on an invisible toffee of betrayal, and he stared at me with the intensity of a parent-teacher meeting gone horribly personal.

But then, he exhaled. Long and slow.

“I *know*,” he said, in a tone so calm it was terrifying. “You think I’m blind?”

You think I didn’t notice her laughing like a lunatic at your lame jokes or pretending your smoke smells like roses?”

He wasn’t angry. No, this was worse—he’d *thought about it*. Deeply.

“Kumar, I swear I haven’t done anything weird,” I said quickly. “Unless you count talking about weed in a romantic context, which I now realize sounds worse out loud.”

He just raised an eyebrow. “You think I haven’t been watching the two of you doing your little banter show like it’s some low-budget rom-com?”

Touché.

But there was no yelling. No threats. No calls to exile me from our friend group. Instead, he just nodded slowly, like a wise village elder, and said, “Just remember—if you break her heart, I *will* break your balls.”

Which, let’s be honest, was a fate worse than a broken nose.

And that, dear reader, is how I learned that Kumar wasn't just the overprotective big brother type—he was the *all-seeing, emotionally evolved, deadpan comedy genius* big brother type. And I had just officially stepped into uncharted territory.

Kumar leaned back, arms crossed, and said with zero drama, “Just say it straight, man. She loves you.”

I blinked. “You think this is a *minor* issue?”

Kumar shrugged like he was talking about the weather. “Everyone knew. The whole class knew. I knew. Heck, even my family knew.”

“Wait, *wait*—you mean Ruba told her *family*?” I stared at him like he'd just said aliens lived next door.

At this point, Kunal chimed in, cool as a cucumber. “Yep.”

I dropped onto the nearest chair like a tragic Bollywood hero and clutched my head. “And your family's... okay with this?!”

Kunal smiled the kind of smile that only people with zero problems in life can pull off. “Oh, absolutely. Mom and Dad are *thrilled*, actually. But after knowing everything, they've been singing praises of your ‘esteemed family heritage’ like it's a 5-star review. Honestly, they're treating this like some royal alliance.”

He went full dramatic now, mimicking his dad's tone:

‘We are deeply honoured to welcome such a fine young man from a family rooted in noble values and time-honoured traditions. What a glorious merger of virtue and vibes!’

I stared at him, horrified. “Are you telling me they're already planning the *wedding*?!”

Kunal grinned. “Not yet. But let's just say... they've mentally booked the venue.”

Me: “Give me a break, I'm still in my fun-loving phase. Do something, ‘Mummy’!”

Kumar: "Look, don't talk to me about this. If you have an issue, talk to Ruba yourself."

Me: "You expect me to handle this? I barely know how to deal with her!"

Kunal: "Exactly. That's why I stay out of it. If I intervene, she'll wreak havoc. Even our family doesn't dare mess with her. So, it's entirely up to you. She likes you—end of discussion."

Me: End of discussion? No way. This was just the beginning.....

If I had to sum up Ruba in just one word, it would be **"strong."** And I don't mean the kind of strong where someone can open a tight pickle jar. I mean *really* strong—the kind of strong that makes you wonder if she secretly lifts motorcycles for fun.

Her strength isn't just physical, though. Mentally, she's rock solid. Determined, focused, and sharper than a knife. But let's talk about that physical strength for a moment—because, honestly, there are days I genuinely believe she could fling me across the room like a sack of potatoes. And not the cute kind. The heavy, muddy, just-dug-out-of-the-field kind.

There's a sweet side to her too, of course. Most people see this kind, gentle version of Ruba—the one who helps old aunties carry groceries and probably rescues kittens from rooftops in her free time. But when she's angry? Oh boy. It's like a Marvel transformation—sweet Ruba goes *Hulk Mode*.

Her temper doesn't come with a warning label. One second, she's smiling. The next, someone's flying through the air. Even Kumar, who once wrestled a drunk bull (don't ask), tiptoes around her like she's a live grenade wearing eyeliner.

As for me? Let's just say I've accepted my fate. If Ruba ever loses her cool around me, I'll probably end up on the floor, clutching my ribs and whispering, "Totally deserved that."

I had spent a ridiculous amount of time mentally preparing myself for what I could only describe as an emotional apocalypse. You see, making her angry wasn't just risky—it was practically a daredevil sport. My past encounters with her fury had left me with a deeply personal understanding of just how powerful her temper could be. Think earthquake, but with more yelling and the occasional flying object.

This wasn't just some mild annoyance I was bracing for. No, I was expecting full-blown, rib-rattling wrath—the kind that made you wonder if health insurance covered emotional trauma and mild internal bleeding.

Even thinking about her rage gave me the chills. My spine did a nervous little tap dance every time I imagined her reaction. But still, I knew I had to face it. There was no backing out now. I took a deep breath, summoned what little courage I had left (which wasn't much), and mentally prepared for the incoming storm.

And then it came—the day that had been looming on the calendar like a dentist appointment with glitter—Valentine's Day.

Even now, thinking about it, I can't help but wonder: who started this whole thing? Who woke up one morning and said, "You know what the world needs? A day where people panic-buy roses, wear too much perfume, and write love notes in cursive." Honestly, I'd like to meet this person. Preferably with a slightly judgmental expression and a bill for all the overpriced chocolate I've bought over the years.

The hype around Valentine's Day is intense. It's not just about love anymore—it's about *grand gestures*. If you're not professing your feelings via skywriting or a flash mob, are you even trying?

The pressure is real. Somewhere along the way, we've gone from sweet handwritten notes to full-blown romantic Olympics. And don't get me wrong, I'm all for love. Big fan. Five stars. But must we really compress all our affection into a single, awkwardly decorated day that smells like synthetic roses and anxiety?

Love, to me, should be messy and spontaneous—like burnt toast on a Sunday morning or laughing during a serious fight. Not this carefully curated performance featuring teddy bears, glittery cards, and candles that smell like “Midnight Passion” (whatever that means).

So yes, while everyone else was swooning under fairy lights, I was busy questioning the entire system, wondering if maybe—just maybe—love deserved better than heart-shaped helium balloons and prix-fixe dinners.

For a while now, I’ve been stuck on one rather baffling question: what in the heart-shaped-heck is going on with Valentine’s Day?

I mean, seriously—designating *one* day in the entire year to express love? Just one? As if emotions have a calendar and a notification that says, “Reminder: Today is the only acceptable day to feel things. Proceed to gift shop.” It’s like putting romance on a government deadline. “Submit your feelings by February 14th, 11:59 PM, or they expire.”

And here’s the part that really twists my chakras—this whole shebang didn’t even start here. Somewhere along the way, we let imported ideas sneak into our desi fabric like a stubborn ketchup stain on a white kurta. Suddenly, we’re talking about candlelight dinners, overpriced bouquets, and teddies holding glitter hearts like it’s the most sacred of rituals. I half expect someone to start singing ‘*Tumse milke dil ka hai jo haal kya Karenin*’ every time a card aisle is opened.

What was once a sweet little idea—celebrating love—has now been hijacked by marketing departments. Love, the tender, complicated, deliciously chaotic feeling, is now being sold in shiny red packaging.

Gone are the days of quiet gestures, like making someone tea just the way they like it or pretending not to notice they left the fan

on. Now it's a competition. Who got the biggest bouquet? Who booked the fanciest restaurant?

Honestly, I miss the raw, messy, unfiltered kind of love. The kind that shows up when you're sick and gross and they still hold your hand (from a safe distance, sure—but the effort counts). That love doesn't need a day. It just needs a little honesty, a lot of patience, and maybe some samosas.

Now hear me out—I know Valentine's Day often gets dismissed as just another excuse to sell glittery cards and stuffed bears the size of a Maruti Alto. But what if we looked at it differently? What if—brace yourself—we made it an official holiday in schools and colleges?

No, I'm not saying students should spend the day writing Shakespearean sonnets or proposing under mango trees with rose petals in their pockets (although, hey, bonus points for effort). I'm talking about something more meaningful—something that involves actual emotional intelligence. You know, that rare and magical quality where people pause for a second and think about how others feel. Revolutionary, I know.

So yes, making Valentine's Day an official holiday might sound like a rom-com plot twist, but it could actually help us raise a generation that's not just smart—but kind, too.

And if that includes a cupcake or two along the way? Even better.

These days, falling in love feels like planning a destination wedding—expensive, exhausting, and in desperate need of a spreadsheet.

Back in the day, romance was simple. You liked someone, you told them, maybe stammered a bit, maybe blushed a lot, and if things went really well, you shared a shy little kiss under a tree—or if you were particularly bold, under the stars. No table reservations. No seven-slide PowerPoint to explain your “proposal strategy.”

Fast forward to now, and suddenly love comes with logistics. People start prepping for Valentine's Day in January like they're launching a rocket. Restaurants are booked weeks in advance. Dinners are curated like five-course art exhibits. One guy I know hired a violinist, a photographer, and a guy dressed as Cupid on roller skates. And she still said, "Let me think about it."

We've gone from "I like you" to "Here's an itinerary."

Don't get me wrong—making someone feel special is beautiful. But somewhere along the way, the pure, honest bits of love got buried under rose petals, fancy lighting, and a three-hour wait for a rooftop table.

Ah, Rose Day—the unofficial trailer to the full-blown romantic blockbuster that is Valentine's Day.

On the eve of the big day, we all gathered like a herd of overexcited peacocks, ready to honour this bizarrely specific tradition: a day entirely dedicated to handing each other flowers and silently judging who got the most. It was simple—boys bought roses, girls received them, and the one who ended up holding a bouquet that could rival a wedding mandap was declared the legendary *Rose Queen*.

And no, this wasn't just a casual title. It was a full-blown, bragging-rights-for-the-year kind of honour. The Rose Queen was basically the campus celebrity for the next few months—whispers in the hallway, admiration from juniors, jealous glances from other girls, and a mysterious increase in friend requests on social media.

The whole place buzzed with nervous excitement. Boys dressed like they were auditioning for a romantic music video—shirts tucked, hair gelled, and pockets jingling with crumpled receipts from the flower shop. Girls pretended not to care while secretly estimating their rose-count potential with the precision of a stockbroker checking the market.

Every rose handed over was a tiny emotional gamble: a red one meant *I like you*, a yellow one meant *we're friends forever*, and a white one usually meant *I panicked and grabbed the last one available*.

And as the sun dipped below the horizon and the rose economy reached peak inflation, the crowd gathered for the grand finale: the coronation of the Rose Queen. Cheers erupted, petals flew, and someone inevitably yelled, "Next year, I'm bringing marigolds. Cheaper and bigger!"

But beneath the playful drama and rose-counting frenzy, something sweet lingered in the air—friendships deepened, secret crushes got a hint of light, and everyone, in some small way, felt seen.

So, It all started with a very suspicious suggestion from my so-called "friends"—a suggestion that 'I should give Ruba a Redrose on Rose Day.'

Now, let me be clear: I had **zero** romantic feelings for Ruba. Zilch. Nada. But that didn't stop my friends from launching a full-on emotional campaign.

Kumar, in particular, came at me like a desperate election candidate. "Look, bro," he said, practically wringing his hands. "I get it—your feelings are your own business. But think about *Ruba*. If she ends up getting fewer roses than the other girls, I swear she'll kill me first.

My face will look like a bouquet—red, yellow, and crushed!"

He was half-joking, but also fully serious, which is a dangerous mix.

I almost caved. Almost.

But then he took it a step further. Kumar, armed with hope and enough enthusiasm to power a small wedding, made a formal request: help him make Ruba's day brighter by contributing a rose—or two—or maybe five. You know, for the cause.

I looked at him, sighed deeply, and said, "No."



Not just “no,” but the kind of no that had punctuation. *Full stop. Period. Thank you, next.*

In fact, I told him I wasn’t even going to show up to college the next day. I needed a break—from roses and from matchmaking politics. The whole idea of orchestrating someone else’s romantic surprise while dodging my own attendance felt like too much emotional cardio.

Kumar looked at me as if I had personally cancelled Valentine’s Day for the entire college. But I stood firm. A little frustrated, a little fed up, and just craving a day where I could exist without floral drama.

Love may have been in the air, but I had officially filed for a day off.

As soon as class was over, we made a beeline for our sacred post-lecture sanctuary—the legendary hostel room. Not exactly glamorous, but it was *ours*. A wobbly table, a couple of chairs in various stages of collapse, one permanently sticky surface (origin unknown), and the lingering aroma of instant noodles—ah yes, the perfect creative zone.

This was where all our big plans were born... and occasionally buried. It was the place where ideas flowed, jokes flew, and the illusion of productivity was masterfully maintained.

“Alright, let’s get serious,” someone would say, only to be derailed seconds later by a heated debate over whether paneer veg-biryani was a crime against food.

Manikant, in a sudden burst of hospitality no one saw coming, announced, “Boys, I’m making tea.”

Now, this was a historic moment. Manikant usually considered boiling water a life-threatening challenge, so when he volunteered to make chai for the whole gang, we knew something was up.

A few minutes later, the room was filled with the heavenly aroma of freshly brewed tea—warm, spiced, and just strong enough

to wake the dead. We all settled into our usual spots, cradling our steaming cups like they were holy relics. And thus began the sacred hostel ritual: “चाय पर चर्चा।” (“Chat over tea.”)

Manikant leaned in dramatically, eyes gleaming, as if he’d just discovered a hidden treasure map.

“You won’t believe what I’ve found!” he declared.

We braced ourselves. With Mani, that could be anything from a secret shortcut to college or to a pigeon that looked like ‘tere naam....hairstyle.’

“I’ve been exploring the area,” he continued, “and I came across two—no, three houses with *gorgeous* rose gardens. I’m talking *filmy-level* roses—reds, pinks, even those orangey ones that look like sunsets!”

He spoke like a man in love. With roses.

We all nodded, mildly impressed. Then I raised the most obvious question:

“So... what?”

Mani sat up straighter, took a loud, purposeful sip of his tea like a villain plotting a heist, and said, “So.. our only option is to sneak in at night and *steal* the roses.”

The room fell silent. Not out of shock—this was classic Manikant logic. But we were all just trying to make sure we heard that right.

“Fifty rupees for a single rose?” he scoffed. “That’s daylight robbery. I mean, with that kind of money, we could live like kings for a whole month in the mess. Think about it— “बुके के चक्कर में भिखारी बन जाएणो!” (“You’ll end up a beggar chasing the bouquet!”)

He had a point. Our wallets were emptier than our attendance sheets.

“So you’re proposing... a floral burglary?” Malik asked.

Mani grinned. “Exactly. Late-night, rose-picking operation. Silent, swift, and slightly mysterious.”

And just like that, “Operation Gulab” was born—because when you’re mad and hopelessly psyche, plucking roses from random people’s gardens suddenly sounds like a master plan.

Naturally, I felt the need to raise my hand—figuratively, not literally—and point out the obvious: *this plan was completely bonkers*.

I mean, let’s be honest—sneaking into people’s gardens in the dead of night to swipe roses?

It sounded less like a love mission and more like the beginning of a very awkward arrest story.

“I don’t know, guys,” I said cautiously. “This has ‘neighbourhood alert’ written all over it.”

Prawal, sitting beside me with a face that could only be described as ‘mildly haunted,’ quickly backed me up. “Yeah, I don’t want my Valentine’s Day to end with me getting chased by someone’s grandfather in his underwear.”

We tried to reason with the group. Really, we did. We gently pointed out minor details—like how *trespassing* was still illegal, or how roses picked under pressure tend to look like they were attacked by a squirrel.

But none of it mattered.

Our words were drowned in a tsunami of enthusiasm, fist-pumps, and wild declarations like, “It’s not theft, it’s flower redistribution!”

At that point, Prawal and I exchanged a long, knowing look—the kind of look that says, *We are the only sane people left in this room*. And yet, somehow, we both knew we were getting dragged into this mess anyway.

Because in hostel? Logic takes a backseat, and chaos rides shotgun.

The very idea of sneaking into a neighbour's garden under the cover of night to "liberate" a few innocent roses had lit a fire under the group. Suddenly, we weren't just broke college students—we were elite agents on a top-secret floral mission. 'Operation Gulab' had officially moved from half-baked joke to *seriously happening*.

There was a strange spark in the air, like we were planning a Hollywood heist, except the prize wasn't a vault full of diamonds—it was petals. Glorious, overpriced petals.

Everyone huddled together like tactical commandos... with the attention span of jackals. Ideas flew across the room faster than our semester's syllabus:

"Should we wear black?"

"What if there's a dog?"

"Do we need a code word?"

"Do roses have poisonous thorns or are those just myth?"

After much passionate debating (and one suspiciously intense diagram on the back of a Saras Salil Magazine), we finally landed on Phase One: the **recon walk**.

Yes, a full-blown scouting mission.

The plan? Take a casual stroll past the "target zone" that night to map out the terrain. You know, like professionals. We'd identify the best entry points, the number of visible windows, and whether the auntie of the house was still awake watching TV at 11 PM.

With our strategy in place and our collective IQ temporarily swapped for adrenaline, we were ready. The night ahead promised everything—adventure, suspense, thorns, and probably a lot of very bad decisions. But one thing was certain: **Rose Day was about to get real.**

Manikant, with the wild gleam of a man who'd watched one too many heist movies, suddenly declared, "Boys, we strike at 3 AM."

Yes, **three in the morning**—that magical hour when the world sleeps, the dogs are too tired to bark, and the only people outside are ghosts and idiots. Guess which one we were about to become.

According to Mani, 3 AM was perfect. "No aunties on their balconies. No uncles on morning walks. Just roses... and us." He said it like we were secret agents heading into enemy territory, not broke students planning to pluck flowers from someone's garden like low-budget Cupids.

He spoke with the passion of a wise speaker and the conviction of a politician before elections. As he paced dramatically, he outlined the whole "mission" step-by-step: entry points, escape routes, emergency signals (spoiler: one of them was a cat sound), and even backup plans in case someone sneezed too loudly.

We listened, half-impressed, half-concerned. Because while his enthusiasm was contagious, so was his complete disregard for logic, law, and possibly gravity.

Still, with every word he spoke, you could feel the excitement building. The thrill of rebellion. The romance of roses. And the very real possibility of getting chased by someone in a lungi.

We weren't just planning a theft—we were planning an adventure. A ridiculous, unforgettable, slightly illegal adventure.

But I, being the designated voice of reason (and common sense), raised my hand like I was in a classroom of fools. "Bro," I said, "3 AM is not romantic, it's criminal. It's so dark we won't even see the roses, let alone pick them."

The group turned to me.

"If we get caught," I continued, "no one's going to say, 'Aww, how cute, love-struck college boys!' They'll say, 'चोर! पकड़ो!'" (thieves! catch them!) and we'll be chased with broomsticks and slippers. And God

forbid we escape, we'll land straight in jail—where the only thing blooming will be *our red behinds*, not roses.”

That got a laugh. But the fear was real.

Still, Manikant stood tall, his ridiculous plan waving in the air like a red flag... or maybe just a red rose waiting to get us arrested.

With that signature glint of mischief in his eyes—the kind that usually showed up five seconds before disaster—Raju leaned back and said, “So... if we're sneaking into gardens and plucking roses in the dead of night without permission... doesn't that technically make us, you know... *thieves?*”

He said it with the innocent tone of someone asking if it might rain tomorrow in rainy season, but we all knew what he was really doing: trying to be the philosopher of the group, with a criminal twist.

A pause hung in the air. And then, one by one, we burst out laughing.

“Gentleman thieves,” Prawal added. “The Robin Hoods of Romance.”

“We steal from the rich gardener... and gift to the flowerless,” Raju grinned.

Despite the obvious risk of getting caught, scolded, or chased with chappals, Raju had somehow managed to turn our shady little mission into a joke we could all rally around. He had that gift—the ability to take a potentially serious moment and dunk it in a bucket of humour, turning guilt into giggles.

At that point, we weren't just a bunch of boys about to commit botanical burglary—we were *the floral mafia*, and the only thing more dangerous than our plan... was our overconfidence.

“My dear brother,” Sheetesh said, adopting the wise tone of a man who'd never committed a crime worse than stealing the last samosa, “don't overthink it. There's a world of difference between stealing roses... and robbing a bank.”

Raju gave Sheetesh a sceptical look, as if to say, *Tell that to the aunty with CCTV eyes.*

Meanwhile, Manikant—our self-appointed mission commander—stood up like a general announcing a battle plan.

“Operation Gulab,” he declared. “We move out at 4 a.m. Not a minute later. Any delay, and we risk getting caught, scolded, chased, or worse—beaten with a broom.

The gravity in his voice was so dramatic, you’d think we were planning to storm a fortress instead of hop a fence and swipe flowers.

Everyone nodded solemnly, fully aware that this was no longer a silly idea. No, no. This had become *a mission of love*. A botanical adventure. A floral felony with flair.

And the countdown had officially begun.

Taking his role far too seriously (and loving every minute of it), Manikant stepped forward like a local Sherlock Holmes, minus the pipe and plus a lot more unnecessary enthusiasm. “Follow me, boys,” he whispered, as though we weren’t just walking through someone’s residential lane at 7 p.m.

He led us past three picturesque houses, each one looking like it had leapt straight out of a gardening magazine or an overly sentimental soap ad. Their front yards were bursting with roses so dazzling they made us temporarily forget we were there on very questionable moral grounds.

“There,” Manikant whispered, pointing at the first house, “See those blood-red petals? That’s the classic desi Gulab—low-maintenance, high drama. Just like my last relationship.”

We chuckled, partly because it was funny and partly to disguise the fact that we were all quietly evaluating fence height and escape routes.

He then waved dramatically at the second house. “That one? Hybrid tea roses. Imported. Each flower probably costs more than my monthly mess bill. Smells like success... and shampoo ads.”

And finally, he pointed at the third yard with a reverent sigh. “This... this is the jackpot. English roses. Full bloom. Petals like silk, fragrance like heaven. If we get even one handful from here, boys, we’re not just giving flowers—we’re giving poetry.”

We all stood there, half in awe and half in fear of being spotted and turned into neighbourhood gossip. The air was thick with the scent of roses and the thrill of impending chaos. At that moment, we weren’t just students. We were undercover agents. Midnight florists. Blundering burglars of botany.

It didn’t just *have* a rose garden—it *was* a rose garden. The entire property looked like it had been hijacked by a floral revolution. Roses weren’t growing in neat little beds here—they were erupting from the ground, scaling the walls, and flinging themselves over balconies like melodramatic film heroines.

The vines had grown so tall, they didn’t even look like plants anymore—they looked like rose-flavoured banyan trees. If you stood under one, you half-expected a talking parrot to emerge and hand you a mystical flower of destiny.

This wasn’t gardening. This was horticultural wizardry.

Every inch of that place screamed, “A retired professor lives here, and he waters these plants more often than he drinks water himself.” The rose bushes were blooming like they had been personally coached by a motivational speaker.

The fragrance? Oh, the fragrance. One deep breath and you’d be ready to write poetry, fall in love, or start your own aromatherapy business. It was like walking into a perfume ad—except real, and with the faint risk of being bitten by a mosquito.

This wasn’t just a garden—it was a love letter written in petals and thorns. Whoever maintained this masterpiece didn’t just grow



roses—they *raised* them. With care, with discipline, and quite possibly with bedtime stories and classical music.

We all stood there, mesmerized, hypnotized, and mildly intimidated.

And of course, *this* was the garden we had chosen to rob.

I crossed my arms, stared at the garden like it was a high-security vault, and said, “Listen, brother, this isn’t just a lawn—it’s the Taj Mahal of rose gardens. You think someone who puts this much effort into growing flowers *doesn’t* have security? Please. There’s got to be cameras, a guard, or at the very least, a retired uncle with insomnia and an iron rod.”

I could already picture it—us trying to climb the fence, only to be greeted by motion-sensor lights, a barking dog named Sheru, and a silent alarm that alerts the nearest police station *and* the housing society group.

“This bungalow is massive,” I continued. “It probably has more CCTV angles than White House. If we try sneaking in, we won’t just get caught—we’ll be viral by breakfast. ‘BREAKING NEWS: Local boys caught sniffing around roses, suspected of planning national-level robbery.’”

I pointed at the house with the authority of someone who had seen *way* too many crime thrillers. “If we get caught, no one’s going to believe we just wanted a few flowers. They’ll think we came to loot jewellery, kidnap someone rich, or worse—steal the dish tv antenna.”

The others looked at me, half-nodding, half still dreaming about a bouquet that didn’t cost their semester’s allowance.

But I was serious. “One wrong step, and we’re not picking roses. We’re picking court dates.”

Manikant spent what felt like an eternity—binoculars in hand and detective instincts on high alert—conducting a full-blown investigation of the house we’d been eyeing. He scrutinized every

detail like a property scout on steroids. Brick by brick, bush by bush, he analysed it all.

“The house,” he announced dramatically, “belongs to an elderly couple. Very sweet, very quiet, very... unguarded.”

Apparently, their son was working abroad, leaving the poor couple to potter around in peace, surviving on morning walks and digestive biscuits. And yet—this was the kicker—they had no alarm systems, no CCTV cameras, not even a nosey neighbour on patrol with a pair of binoculars.

We were all silently impressed.

Sheetesh looked at Manikant like he'd just watched him audition for the role of "Mastermind Criminal" in a thriller.

“Bhai,” Sheetesh said, raising an eyebrow, “you started off talking about stealing a couple of roses, and now look at you—you’ve done background checks, mapped entry points, and practically created a PowerPoint presentation verbally. Are we plucking flowers or planning a bank robbery?”

Manikant, ever the calm conspirator, sipped his hostel made espresso and replied with complete sincerity, “Safety first, my friend. Just because we’re doing something dumb doesn’t mean we do it *carelessly*.”

The gang went silent for a second—half-impressed, half-concerned.

It was official. What started as a light-hearted idea had now evolved into “Operation Gulab”—and Manikant had unknowingly nominated himself as the Mission Commander.

After an intense roundtable discussion—which felt less like planning a rose heist and more like prepping for a moon landing—we finally agreed: it was time to get serious.

So we packed up and marched off to spend the night at the legendary hostel.

We devoured a mountain of food, clinked a few soda bottles in the name of “brotherhood,” and declared that we’d hit the sack early. After all, the Great Rose Caper was scheduled for post-midnight, and we needed to be fresh criminals.

To make sure we didn’t oversleep, we set the rusty old clock alarm—which sounded like a dying duck on steroids—and assembled our “toolkit.”

One pair of scissors: check.

One flashlight with half a battery: check.

And then... Kailash, bless his overenthusiastic heart, pulled out a **knife** like we were breaking into Fort Knox, not clipping petals.

Malik nearly choked on his espresso.

“Bro,” he said, voice cracking between panic and disbelief, “are we stealing roses not auditioning for a crime documentary? If someone catches us with *that knife*, we’ll go from ‘cute romantic boys’ to ‘prime suspects in a double homicide’ real fast!”

That sobered us up. We all stared at the knife like it had personally betrayed us. After a dramatic group vote, the knife was safely banished back into Kailash’s bag, and we promised to stick to the humble scissors.

With our tools assembled and nerves only slightly frayed, we lay down on our hostel beds, the thrill of midnight mischief buzzing in the air.

We were ready. Almost.

I nodded in total agreement—flashlight and scissors were our tools of choice. Not exactly Mission Impossible gear, but hey, we weren’t stealing the Crown Jewels. We were just out to “borrow” a few roses... respectfully, quietly, and preferably without jail time.

Both of us knew preparation was key. No room for rookie mistakes.

So after one last round of overthinking—“What if the flashlight dies?” “What if the scissors squeak?” “What if a dog thinks we’re burglars?”—we finally agreed on something more urgent: sleep.

“Tomorrow,” I said, stretching dramatically, “we become legends... or at least, very cautious thieves.”

With that, we lay back on our creaky hostel beds, trying to drift off. The room was quiet, except for someone snoring like a tractor in the corner and the occasional mosquito auditioning near our ears.

Still, sleep eventually wrapped us in its warm, lazy hug—because we knew we’d need all the energy we could get to survive what promised to be the most absurd, adrenaline-filled, rose-stealing operation in the history of hostel life.

At exactly 3:30 AM—because apparently, even chaos loves punctuality—the alarm went off like a siren from hell. Whatever peace our dreams had gifted us was immediately yanked away, replaced by the harsh, soul-piercing *tring.. tring.. tring..* of that ancient alarm clock probably gifted by Galileo.

Wrapped snugly in our blankets like half-baked burritos, none of us moved. The room was freezing. The kind of cold that makes you question your life choices—like why you agreed to this ridiculous plan in the first place.

“Do we *have* to steal roses?” someone mumbled from under a blanket. “Can’t we just gift poems and pretend we’re deep?”

No one laughed. It was too cold for humour.

Still, after a lot of groaning, shivering, and bargaining with the universe, we rolled out of bed like reluctant soldiers heading into floral combat. Flashlights in hand, scarves wrapped around our faces like budget ninjas, we tiptoed toward the front gate.

The outside world was pitch black and so quiet it felt... suspicious. Even the stray dogs—normally the loudest, most opinionated members of the night shift—were missing in action. Probably curled up somewhere warm, laughing at us from afar.

Our breath fogged in the air, our fingers froze around the scissors, and the only sound was the soft *crunch-crunch* of our slippers on the frostbitten ground.

We were cold, half-awake, and questioning every decision we'd ever made—but we were moving. Because Operation Rose Heist had officially begun.

And just like that, we did it—we actually climbed the wall. It wasn't graceful. It wasn't heroic. It definitely wasn't quiet. But somehow, with the coordination of clumsy monkeys on a mission, we flopped over the edge and landed—*thud by thud*—into the middle of the most magical rose garden we'd ever seen.

To our surprise, the place was silent. No barking dogs. No porch lights flickering on. No elderly uncle yelling, “कौन है वहाँ?” (“Who's there?!”) Just peaceful, fragrant air and a ridiculous number of roses, swaying gently like they'd been waiting just for us.

Manikant, somewhere in the shadows, puffed up with pride. “Told you,” he whispered smugly. “My intel is flawless.”

No one dared argue. Bro had officially earned the title of *Captain Gulab*.

Then, we got to work.

Flashlights clamped awkwardly between our teeth like we were part of a very low-budget SWAT team, we split up. Some tiptoed through the bushes like ninjas in pyjamas, while others crouched dramatically, scissors snipping with surgical precision. Those without scissors resorted to their bare hands, plucking roses with the tenderness of monks harvesting sacred herbs.

The silence was broken only by the occasional whisper:

“Careful, don't rip the stem!”

“Ow, thorns, thorns!”

“Dude, stop smelling them, we're on a schedule!”

After about twenty minutes of frantic but surprisingly efficient teamwork, we gathered near the wall with what could only be described as floral loot: nearly **150-160 roses** in every shade of romance imaginable.

We stood there in the moonlight, shivering, grinning, and slightly scratched up, holding bouquets like victorious warriors after battle.

We had done it. Operation Rose Heist was a blooming success.

There they were—**two massive bags**, bursting at the seams with roses so fresh and fragrant, you'd think we'd just robbed the Garden of Eden.

But behind those glorious bouquets was a saga of silent suffering.

Because let me tell you: **roses fight back**.

Thorns came at us from every direction—like tiny ninjas hidden behind petals. Our arms, legs, even *foreheads* weren't spared. One thorn jabbed me so deep, I briefly considered giving up romance forever and joining a monastery.

And the blankets we'd brought to carry the roses? Brilliant in theory. In reality, they snagged on every bush like they were auditioning for a clingy relationship. One moment you're gathering flowers, the next you're trapped in a passionate wrestling match with shrubbery.

To top it off, we couldn't even yell. Not a squeak. Not an "Ouch!" Not even a polite "Excuse me, Mr. Thorn, that hurt."

Because any sound louder than a breath might've alerted the whole neighbourhood. So there we were—getting stabbed by plants, tangled in blankets, and biting our lips so hard we almost needed first aid—**all in total silence**. It was painful. It was awkward. It was weirdly beautiful.

And it was, without a doubt, the most dramatic bouquet collection in the history of hostel life.

Our blankets, bless their tired old threads, were hanging on by their last molecules—torn, frayed, and looking like they’d survived a war zone. Which, to be fair, they kind of had. These weren’t just blankets anymore—they were veterans of the Great Rose Heist.

In the dim pre-dawn light, it looked less like a romantic hideaway and more like something from a horror movie titled *Attack of the Killer Shrubs*.

From inside the safety of the wall, the outside world felt distant and fuzzy—like a dream we weren’t entirely sure we’d wake up from or get arrested in.

We stood there, staring at our overflowing bags, drenched in the heavenly scent of roses and the mild panic of "What now?"

And then it hit us: **it was time to leave**. Time to stop before we went from mildly mischievous to full-blown floral maniacs.

There’s a fine line between being bold and being greedy, and we’d tiptoed dangerously close to the edge. Any more roses, and we weren’t just students on a love mission—we’d be garden looters with a pending FIR.

Just as we tiptoed out of the rose garden—arms looking like we’d fought a particularly angry cactus and bags stuffed with enough flowers to open a black-market florist—our victory march came to a screeching halt. Because right there, waiting for us like the final boss of a video game, was a sight so terrifying that our souls packed their bags and *vacated the premises*. Think classic *Tom and Jerry* moment—when Tom’s spirit rockets out of his body the instant the bulldog growls. Yep. That was us. Soul gone. Pride gone. Only panic remained.

A giant German Shepherd.

No, not just big. Huge. The kind of dog that makes you question your diet, your life choices, and whether your last will and testament is up to date. It was sitting right there by the gate,

looking like it had been expecting us. Like some canine bouncer assigned to guard the roses.

Its jaw alone looked like it could swallow Mani in one bite—with dessert.

We froze. Instantly. Not a word. Not a breath. Our brains hit the emergency brake and refused to move another muscle.

But then... nothing happened.

No bark. No growl. No sudden lunge for the ankles. The dog just sat there, calm and majestic, like a monk who had achieved spiritual enlightenment and decided violence was beneath him.

He didn't look angry. Or sleepy. Or even particularly curious. He looked... wise. Like he'd seen many fools before us try this very thing, and he was simply waiting to see how our story ended.

Honestly, if he had pulled out a pair of reading glasses and a cup of tea sat on a rolling chair, we wouldn't have been surprised.

For a moment, we wondered if he was even real. Was this a hallucination brought on by sleep deprivation and the scent of 150 roses?

Or was this dog the silent, four-legged soul of the garden—sent to judge us gently, but firmly?

Either way, we didn't move a muscle. Because when a dog that size gives you a peaceful stare... you don't blink.

For a full sixty seconds—yes, we counted—we stood there frozen like mannequins in a badly lit showroom, locked in a silent stare-off with the dog.

Nobody moved. Nobody breathed. Nobody even blinked.

It was as if the world had hit pause, and we were stuck in some slow-motion spaghetti western, minus the hats and with way more floral baggage.



The air was so thick with tension, you could've cut it with the scissors still dangling from someone's hand. Every second that ticked by made the whole scene feel less like reality and more like a fever dream. And then, just when we thought it couldn't get any weirder, the same bizarre thought popped into all our heads:

"Wait... is that even a real dog?"

I mean, come on—he hadn't barked, growled, moved, or twitched a single whisker. His stillness was museum-grade. It was entirely possible we were all suffering from sleep-deprived hallucinations and had just risked jail time to get spooked by a life-size wooden statue.

We squinted. He stared.

We leaned forward a little. He didn't flinch.

Was this dog a guardian of the roses... or a surprisingly realistic piece of garden décor?

Our minds spiralled. What if we ran and the "statue" chased us? What if we tried to pat it and it bit our future off?

It was the most surreal standoff of our lives—a strange moment suspended in time, halfway between horror and hilarity, as we stood there trying to figure out if we'd just pulled off the perfect heist... or were about to be barked into next week.

Raju leaned in and whispered, "I think the dog is dumb."

I turned to him slowly, trying to suppress the grin spreading across my face like jam on hot toast.

"Oh, absolutely," I said, nodding with exaggerated seriousness. "Why don't you go have a heart-to-heart with him? Maybe he's just waiting for someone to open up first. You never know—he might've been holding onto secrets all these years, just dying to find the right listener."

Raju looked at me, half-confused, half-intrigued.

“In fact,” I added, now fully leaning into the nonsense, “have you ever considered he might be your long-lost relative? The way he’s staring at you with those deep, soulful eyes... that’s not just curiosity. That’s recognition. Maybe in a past life you were both royal guard dogs in some palace, sniffing out conspiracy and leftover mutton curry.”

By now, Raju’s sceptical expression had melted into a dazed kind of wonder, like he was genuinely weighing the possibility of being spiritually connected to a four-legged gatekeeper.

“He’s clearly trying to send you a message,” I whispered dramatically. “Only you can decode it. Go on, Dr. Dog Doolittle.”

Our little group, still frozen in our garden-criminal crouch, started to shake with barely contained laughter. The tension broke just enough for us to breathe again—even if it was through muffled giggles.

The tension in the air was so thick, it could’ve been sliced and served with butter. My joke—normally a guaranteed crowd-pleaser—landed with all the impact of a soggy biscuit. Not even a snort. Not even a pity chuckle. Just blank stares and the continued death-glare of the world’s most confusing dog. That’s when my brain, perhaps short-circuiting from lack of sleep and emotional trauma, latched onto a bizarre idea:

### **What if dogs were actually mute?**

I mean, think about it. We’ve all just *assumed* they bark, but have you personally verified it with a certificate? Maybe we’d stumbled upon a rare, top-secret breed of ultra-disciplined, *spiritually enlightened silent dog*. A four-legged Devine spirit in disguise.

After what felt like several decades compressed into five minutes, an unspoken agreement passed among us like a telepathic group text: **It’s time to leave. Quietly. Before we make it worse.**

We had our loot. We had our limbs intact. And we had absolutely no idea if the dog was about to bless us or bite us.

Without another word, we slowly turned, tiptoed backwards like cartoon burglars, and began our *very* cautious retreat back to the hostel—dignity crumpled, hearts racing, and still unsure whether we’d just outwitted a guard dog or dramatically tiptoed away from a statue.

Either way, the Great Rose Caper wasn’t over yet... but we’d just survived its strangest boss battle.

After what felt like an eternity of silent staring and internal screaming, we finally gathered the courage to move. Slowly—very slowly—we rose to our feet and started inching toward the gate, trying to look casual, like a group of slightly suspicious gardeners just out for an early morning stroll with *very full bags of roses*.

But just as we took our first delicate, hopeful steps toward freedom, the dog—our previously silent, possibly wooden companion—**came to life**.

And by “came to life,” I mean it exploded into a barking frenzy loud enough to wake not just the neighbourhood, but probably a few ancestors too.

“WOOF! WOOF! WOOF!” it thundered, with all the enthusiasm of a dog that had just remembered its job description. The peaceful zen master was gone; in his place stood a full-volume, tail-wagging, bark-blasting siren of doom. We all froze like we’d hit a glitch in a video game. But here’s the twist—**the dog didn’t chase us. Didn’t growl. Didn’t even stand up.** It just barked and barked like it was narrating our heist to the entire colony, with great theatrical flair.

We stared at it, dumbfounded.

So... it *could* bark. It just... **chose not to**. Until now.

The betrayal was personal.

Turns out, our “mute guardian of peace” was just **waiting for the perfect dramatic moment**—and wow, did he nail the timing.

That dog’s bark tore through the calm night like a fire alarm in a library. Inside the house, the poor homeowner shot out of bed like a missile, completely unaware that he was about to become the unintentional villain in a college-level comedy.

Eyes wide, heart pounding like a dhol(drum) at a wedding, he stumbled out from under his cozy blanket, convinced that disaster had come knocking—probably wearing slippers and holding a bouquet.

Fuelled by half-sleep and full panic, he bolted toward the front gate, his brain conjuring every crime show he’d ever seen. He wasn’t thinking “kids picking roses”; no—his mind was racing with images of masked intruders, stolen jewellery, and dramatic newspaper headlines.

Then, with all the authority of a man whose sleep had been rudely stolen, he bellowed into the night:

**“Chor! Chor! THIEVES!”**

The words echoed through the colony like a public service announcement with surround sound. Dogs barked back in reply. Lights flicked on in houses like popcorn popping. Somewhere, an uncle fell off his charpai(cot).

And us?

We froze.

Clutching our thorn-scratched blankets and bursting bags of roses, we suddenly looked a whole lot less like students and a whole lot more like... actual criminals.

“The dog betrayed us, brother,” Raju huffed, clutching his side like a tragic hero wronged by fate.

I didn’t even slow down. “Great,” I shouted over my shoulder, still mid-sprint. “Then you stay back and sort out your feelings.

Maybe write him a heartfelt letter. The rest of us are escaping with our lives!”

Raju blinked, looked at the barking dog like it had just broken his heart, then bolted after us—betrayal and all—blanket dragging behind him like a wounded cape.

We didn’t wait to process the homeowner’s heartfelt shout. “**Chor! Chor!**” was enough to hit the emergency launch button in our brains. In a split second, the group turned into a stampede of confused, floral-scented chaos.

**Raju** tried to scale the wall first, but in his rush, he slipped on a rose stem, landed flat on his back, and let out a sound that could only be described as a dying accordion.

**Prawal**, ever the multitasker, attempted to climb the gate *while still holding his rose bag*, which promptly split open mid-jump. Roses rained down like romantic confetti, turning the escape route into a slippery floral minefield.

**Manikant**, meanwhile, got tangled in his own blanket-turned-sack and accidentally headbutted a potted plant. The pot shattered. He muttered, “It wasn’t even that pretty,” and kept running with dirt in his hair.

And me? I heroically tried to lift Raju to his feet—but ended up elbowing him in the ribs, tripping over Prawal’s roses, and crashing headfirst into the gate.

The dog, still at his post, simply watched with a judgmental expression, as if to say,

**“Amateurs.”**

To make things even better, the homeowner—now joined by at least **two aunties in nighties** and a sleepy uncle with a stick—arrived just in time to witness our grand escape ballet.

The last thing I heard before vaulting over the final wall was an aunty yelling,

“अरे भाई, बस फूल ही तो लेकर जा रहे हैं।”

“Oh come on, they're just taking flowers!”

We sprinted like our lives (and criminal records) depended on it—because, frankly, they kind of did. Behind us, the homeowner's shouts grew louder and more frantic, echoing through the night like a man who'd just discovered his garden had been looted by hormonal college students with romantic intentions.

The garden, which earlier felt charming and lovely, now felt **massive**. Like it had tripled in size just to spite us. Every flowerbed blurred past us in technicolour streaks, every bush looked identical, and every turn felt like a repeat of the last five. It was less "escape plan" and more "chaotic cardio with bonus thorns."

Raju, panting beside me, gasped, “Why does this garden have **phases**? Are we in a housing colony or *Narnia*?!”

With every step, our legs burned, our lungs screamed, and yet—somehow—it felt like we were running in circles inside a floral video game set on nightmare difficulty. Still, the thrill was real. Adrenaline carried us like caffeinated deer through the endless maze, and with every corner we turned, we hoped—**prayed**—we were one step closer to freedom... or at least the boundary wall.

As we neared the gate, the thudding footsteps behind us grew louder—like a suspense soundtrack someone forgot to turn off. The homeowner was gaining on us, shouting things we didn't dare translate. Our hearts pounded like festival drums as we scrambled into full escape mode.

The plan was simple: climb the wall, leap like champions, run like cowards.

One by one, we clambered up, our feet fumbling for footholds, our hands clinging to cracks and crevices like lizards with anxiety issues. The wall had never looked taller or less cooperative.

And just as **Mani** was swinging his leg over—almost free, almost triumphant—we heard it.

**A lunge. A shout. A desperate final grab.**

The homeowner's fingers caught the edge of Mani's blanket.

There was a moment—one of those cinematic slow-motion moments—when we all turned and saw Mani teetering on the edge, the homeowner clinging to the blanket like it was the last helicopter out of the apocalypse.

Mani's eyes widened. The homeowner growled.

With every last ounce of muscle he could summon, the homeowner gripped the blanket like it owed him rent. On the other side, **Mani** dug in his heels, holding on for dear life. And just like that, we found ourselves in the middle of a full-blown midnight **tug-of-war**—but with slightly more adrenaline and slightly less dignity.

Mani pulled. The uncle pulled back.

The blanket stretched dangerously between them like a contestant in a fabric stress test.

“Leave it!” we hissed in panicked whispers.

“No!” Mani grunted back. “This blanket has been with me since I was born!”

To make things even stranger, both sides suddenly started laughing—yes, **laughing**—like they'd both just realized how ridiculous this whole moment was. A student and a barefoot uncle, locked in a tug battle over a second-hand blanket filled with thorny roses at 4:30 a.m., under the hazy moonlight.

But just when we thought things had reached peak weirdness—**BARK BARK BARK!!!**

From the other side of the wall, like an overly dramatic entry in a soap opera, the dog **reappeared**, howling like it had been summoned to rescue the dignity of the household.

It didn't just bark—it **announced** itself.

**“Ladies and gentlemen, I am BACK!”**—that’s what it sounded like.

Its paws hit the earth like drumbeats of doom, and that joyful tug-of-war instantly turned into a **chaotic scramble**.

**“ABANDON THE BLANKET!”** I shouted like a captain evacuating a ship.

Mani let go mid-pull, sending the homeowner stumbling backward with the blanket triumphantly in hand—**and a face full of rose petals**.

The dog barked louder. We bolted.

The whole situation was snowballing faster than a hostel rumour. Chaos was everywhere—barking dog, shouting uncle, roses flying like Holi colours—and right in the middle of it all was **Commando**, clinging to his beloved, rose-stuffed blanket like it was his childhood teddy bear.

I turned to him, my voice raised like a dramatic hero in a climax scene.

**“Commando! Let go of the blanket!”**

“I know you love it,” I pleaded, dodging a falling rose “but if we don’t escape right now, that same blanket will be used by the police—to wrap us up like mutton rolls!”

He hesitated.

“They’ll drag us to the station like burritos of shame, yaar! Do you really want to be arrested holding a floral print and a thorn in your butt”

Malik, ever the strategist—even in moments of crisis—panted between gulps of air, “Well, since the blanket’s already a lost cause, why not just gift it to the dog? Call it a parting souvenir.”

Without missing a beat, Mani sighed dramatically, “Hey, doggie,” he said, extending the rest blanket like an offering to a king.



“Put it on. You’ve earned it. Congratulations—you’re now the proud owner of a second-hand floral-print hostage situation.”

The dog barked once, as if accepting the promotion, while the rest of us watched in disbelief as Mani performed what was possibly the world’s first **honorary blanket handover ceremony** to a security dog mid-heist.

We didn’t know whether to laugh, run, or salute.

So we did all three.

We ran like our lives depended on it—because, technically, they kind of did. Our feet slapped the ground like overworked tabla players, hearts pounding in a rhythm that screamed, **“Escape now, process trauma later!”** Every twist and turn of the colony felt like it had been designed by a drunk maze architect with a grudge against directionally challenged students.

Adrenaline surged through us like we’d mainlined six cups of hostel chai. We darted past bushes, leapt over potholes, and dodged imaginary lasers in our heads, half expecting the homeowner to suddenly appear on a bike, swinging a slipper like a lasso.

Just when we thought our lungs might file a formal complaint, we saw it—the glowing, glorious gates of the hostel.

And just like that, the chaos outside vanished.

**Peace. Quiet. Walls.**

We were home.

Bruised. Scratched. Possibly traumatized. But victorious.

And best of all, **not in jail.**

As we sat there, catching our breath and peeling off leaves like survivors of a particularly thorny apocalypse, a horrifying realization hit us—each of us had collected **at least 15 to 20 thorns**, generously embedded into our arms, legs, and, in some unfortunate cases, *other regions*. It was less a garden raid and more a mobile acupuncture session from China.

But hey—silver lining? The dog hadn't bitten anyone.

Sure, he emotionally scarred us, shattered our trust, and blew our cover like a seasoned double agent, but at least no one had to get a tetanus shot. Small victories.

We sat in stunned silence, looking like war veterans from the *Battle of Rosebush 2003* unable to speak, process, or locate proper first aid. It took a solid 20 minutes, a packet of local made biscuit, and three sips of hot tea to feel remotely human again.

And then, just as the first rays of dawn peeked through the hostel window like an innocent bystander, we all looked at each other...

...and looked at Mani.

The one who planned this mission.

The one who swore there would be “no risk.”

The man who offered a *dog* his blanket in a formal handover ceremony.

Before he could blink, we pounced.

“Hold him!” someone yelled.

“Get the belt!” someone else added.

And there, in the golden glow of sunrise, Mani found himself pinned to the bed, pants halfway down, receiving twelve well-deserved belt lashings from us.

Justice was swift.

No trial. No jury. Just pain, petals, and poetic closure.

Praval shot Mani a death glare that could've fried a papad on the spot.

“What were you thinking during that last ‘reconnaissance mission,’ brother?” he snapped, hands on hips like a furious school principal. “Was your brain on vacation or just doing *timepass*?”

He paced dramatically, clearly building momentum. “One wrong move, just **one**, and we’d all be sitting in the emergency ward with **14 stitches in our belly**—each! And not the cool kind you show off. The painful, *explain-to-your-parents* kind!”

Mani blinked.

“This isn’t a video game, bhai! You don’t just respawn after a dog bite or a chappal(slippers) to the face. Next time, we plan properly—maps, strategy, maybe even Google Earth, okay?”

Mani gave a sheepish nod, clearly regretting life choices—but mostly regretting friends with such dramatic monologues.

Despite everything—the dog betrayal, the thorn attacks, the blanket sacrifice, and the emotional trauma of getting whacked with a belt—**Mani’s spirit was still somehow alive and kicking**. If anything, the chaos had just added more fuel to his already overcaffeinated soul.

He stood there like a man possessed by the ghost of *Captain Jack Sparrow*, eyes twinkling with mischief, hair mildly windblown (mostly due to panic running), and a grin spreading across his face like someone who hadn’t just narrowly avoided becoming the lead character in a late-night news report.

After barely next ten minutes of “rest”—which for the rest of us felt like we were recharging after a war—Mani suddenly jolted upright, clapped his hands, and said, “**So... should I head back and see what’s going on over there?**”

Over there. As in **the place we just escaped from**.

As in **the land of barking dogs, shouting uncles, and emotional damage**.

We stared at him.

Raju coughed. “Bhai, are you okay? Did a thorn poke your common sense?”

But Mani was glowing—**positively glowing**—like Sindhbhad with a death wish. His thirst for adventure knew no bounds. The man was ready for round two. Clearly, someone had to hide his shoes before he acted on this madness.

I turned to Mani, who was still buzzing with heroic delusions, and said, **“O enlightened guru of nonsense, that dog is probably doing catwalks around the colony with your blanket like it’s Lakmé Fashion Week. You go back now, and in two minutes flat, you’ll be caught, scolded, and possibly rewrapped in it like a burrito of shame. So do us all a favour—close your ‘box of wisdom’ and go make us a nice cup of tea.”**

Mummy, ever the voice of maternal sarcasm, chimed in,

**“Forget the tea. I think Mani is still in shock. Someone book him a session with a psychiatrist before he starts talking to plants.”**

Kailash, rubbing the sting from his earlier belt session, added without missing a beat,

**“Psychiatrist? No need, Mummy. What he really needs... is a one-on-one seminar with a chappal. Call it ‘Shoe Experience 101’—free registration, no refund.”**

Everyone burst out laughing—except Mani, who suddenly looked very interested in the tea suggestion.

We armed ourselves with a bizarre assortment of mismatched utensils, as if a confused flea market had sponsored our tea party. The “cups” ranged from ancient soup bowls to shady-looking steel tumblers. Mine didn’t even have a handle—looked like someone had chewed it off in a fit of rage—but it held tea, and that’s all that mattered.

Raju, meanwhile, was sipping calmly from a **tiny brass pot normally used for temple rituals**, cradling it like a monk on a spiritual caffeine journey. “It has good vibes,” he said solemnly, before dunking a biscuit into it with zero irony.

But none of that mattered.

The tea was hot, the biscuits were salty, and for the first time in hours, no one was screaming “Thief!”

We sat there like the world's most unqualified planning committee, discussing college plans, career goals, and occasionally drifting off into debates like, “What if we sold roses professionally?”

It was the kind of bizarre, heartwarming chaos that only happens in college—and we loved every second of it.

After a long and slightly overdramatic conversation—complete with tea, biscuits, and just the right amount of existential overthinking—we finally shook hands (and some leftover thorns) on one thing: **we’d start college together, side by side, like the chaotic brothers we were destined to be.**

But while the squad was planning big, I made a quiet little decision of my own.

**I wasn’t going to take a single rose, Not one.** No rose in the pocket. No rose in the hand.

I decided: **Let fate do the flower work.**

Maybe, just maybe, roses would find me when I actually needed them.

I looked at Mani, narrowed my eyes and said, **“Brother, why on earth are you dragging me into this so-called ‘free love’ mess?”**

**You don’t even realize the size of the blunder you’ve just made. And guess what?**

**I’ll be the one stuck paying the emotional EMI for it later!”**

He blinked.

“Mark my words,” I continued, dramatically pointing my finger like a courtroom lawyer, “today it’s just a rose... tomorrow, it’s awkward stares, random rumours, and me getting involved with her!”

He grinned.

“And let’s be honest, it’s better than her crying into her last bouquet while we stand there like extras in a breakup scene.”

Mani, channeling the wisdom of a self-proclaimed love strategist, leaned in and said, “Look, the emotional mess you’re in? We’ll unpack that later. Right now, **focus.**”

“Soon,” he said gravely, “everyone’s rose stash will start running low. Petals will droop. Stems will snap. Love will be tested.”

“And Ruba,” he continued, lowering his voice like he was delivering tragic news, “she’ll be standing there with just... 24 or 25 roses.”

He paused dramatically. “Can you imagine the horror?”

Before I could respond, Mani whipped out his grand plan, like a magician pulling a rabbit out of an emotional top hat.

“Every few minutes,” he said, jabbing his finger at me, “**you** will walk up to her—cool, calm, no filmy background music—and hand her one rose. Just one. Each time.”

“Don’t overdo it. No Mohabbatein pose. No ‘Tujhe Dekha’ humming. Just walk in, deliver the flower, exit like a gentleman.”

He grinned.

“She’ll feel appreciated. You’ll look like God of Romance. And by the end of the day, people will start calling her the **Queen of Roses...** and you? The **Secret Supplier of Happiness.**”

I stared at him, somewhere between admiration and the urge to hurl a flowerpot at his head.

I looked at Mani and said, “Look, I get it—this entire plan is dripping with the kind of romance you only find in chocolate commercials. But brother, I’m telling you, there’s a problem brewing here. A big one.”

He raised an eyebrow. I continued, arms flailing for dramatic effect.

“What if,” I said, lowering my voice like I was narrating a crime documentary, **“every girl on campus gets showered with a tsunami of roses,** and Ruba... poor Ruba... is left with just one lonely flower. Just one! Held by me in first round. With my stupid, hopeful smile plastered on my face.”

I paused for effect.

“She’ll lose it, bhai. She’ll glare at me like I’ve personally offended the entire floral industry. And when I offer that one rose like some tragic Romeo... I swear, I can already hear her voice in my head—**‘Wah Sirji! Kya baat hai!’**”

Mani tried not to laugh. I wasn’t done.

“And then, in a fit of rage, she might just take that very rose, **roll it up like a scroll of shame, and shove it right up my backside**—turning it into an unsanctioned *rose bouquet surprise*. And let me tell you, no one—**no one**—wants a flower blooming from that direction.”

I looked around. “So tell me, dear comrades of chaos, who among you would come to rescue me from that rosy disaster? Who would have the guts to say, ‘Ruba, please... let’s not turn this into an chapter of *Crime novel?*’”

The room fell silent. Not a soul volunteered.

Even Mani looked away and sipped his tea like it was suddenly very interesting.

The whole gang chimed in like a poorly rehearsed chorus,

**“Arre bhai, we’re all right here, aren’t we?”**

**What are you so scared of? The rose?**

**The girl? Or the possible butt-bouquet situation?”**

Their tone was half-supportive, half-sarcastic, and 100% the reason for I sometimes question all my life choices.

The vibe around me was perfect—warm lights, friendly faces, and that signature hostel laughter that always sounds one step away from becoming a riot. It should’ve felt like home. But somewhere in my gut, a weird little voice kept whispering, “*Something’s fishy, bro.*”

Everyone was smiling, nodding, being all supportive and sentimental—but I couldn’t shake the feeling that behind those innocent expressions lay **secret agendas**, most likely involving me, Ruba, and a dramatic rose-related public embarrassment.

I stared at my so-called friends—the same Nobel Prize nominees who once convinced me to jump off a moving bus because, and I quote, “*Just roll, jaar! Physics sambhal lega!*”

Yeah, well, physics did not “sambhal” anything. Gravity and asphalt worked overtime that day. I left a generous donation of my skin on the road—enough to start a second-hand leather business—and spent the next few weeks regenerating like a lizard on an unpaid internship.

So now, forgive me if my default setting around them is *suspicion*. It’s called survival instinct, not paranoia.

Finally, with just the right amount of melodrama in my voice, I stood up and said, “**Bas! I don’t trust any of you. I’m going full disclosure—every single rose we’ve got is going on Ruba’s hand at once.**”

The planning was done. The mission was green-lit. The roses were counted, cleaned. We marched into college like a team of emotionally unstable Cupids.

The girls were glowing. Roses flew through the air like confetti at a Bollywood wedding. Laughter echoed in the hallways. And Ruba?

Well, Ruba was getting roses too—plenty of them. From all directions. It was like a floral flash mob around her.



But here's the twist: **she still hadn't gotten *my* rose.**

Yep. The rose that, apparently, came with an invisible emotional warranty.

Despite the armful she had already received, she kept sneaking glances around. Her smile was starting to fade just a little. The "Rose Queen" energy was slipping, petal by petal.

And me?

Oh, I was dying inside.

There was a full-blown wrestling match going on in my stomach. Part nerves. Part guilt.

**What if she weaponizes a rose stem and stabs me in public with the words, "THIS WAS MEANT TO BE YOURS?"**

The pressure was building like a pressure cooker with no whistle. I had to act fast—or risk becoming the villain in a college rom-com.

As the clock kept ticking and my rose kept *not* arriving, Ruba began to unravel like a soap opera character mid-season finale.

Tears welled up in her eyes—real, dramatic ones, the kind you see in slow-motion rain scenes. She looked around, blinking through the emotional monsoon, and what did she see?

Every girl around her was practically drowning in flowers. It was a botanical stampede out there.

One girl had a bouquet so huge it needed two rubber bands and a backup friend for support. Another had roses tucked behind her ears, in her hair bun, and even one sticking out of her shoe like a fashion statement gone floral.

But the ultimate betrayal?

That came when Ruba's eyes landed on **Poonam**, the soft-spoken girl from Environmental Science.

Sixty-one roses.

## Sixty-One.

That wasn't a bouquet—that was a **garden with a roll number**.

Ruba's jaw dropped. Her tear-filled eyes went wide with disbelief, as if Poonam had just been crowned Miss Photosynthesis 2003.

Meanwhile, Ruba stood there with just a stinging silence and a deepening pool of “Why me?” brewing in her chest.

It was as if every bloom in the universe had conspired to skip her lane.

And that, my friend, was the moment I realized: **I was in so much trouble**.

I turned to my friends, practically yanked the roses out of bags, and hissed, “Hand them over, bro. Now. Before this becomes a full-blown emotional landslide.”

The air around us was already buzzing with chaos and cruel laughter—the kind only close friends can deliver without getting punched.

“Arre yaar, give it to her!” someone shouted.

Another one chimed in, “Bhuvan can't even *breathe* properly when Ruba's eyes get watery!”

Mani: “He's ready to donate a kidney if she so much as *sniffles*!”

The group howled. It was a full-blown roast session, and I was the main course.

Meanwhile, I stood there like a malfunctioning Romeo, sweating under the spotlight, the roses clutched in my hand like they were radioactive.

But I knew they were right. The clock was ticking, the audience was watching, and Ruba was about one sniffle away from converting her heartbreak into a nationwide protest.

If there was any chance to turn this melodrama back into a love story, **this was it**.

I tried explaining to the gang that my sadness wasn't because Ruba was *my girlfriend* or anything—because, let's be clear, **she wasn't** (yet). The ache in my heart came from this strange, sobering truth: we had the power to make her feel truly seen, appreciated, and celebrated... and yet, like a bunch of emotional vegetables, we just didn't.

It bothered me. Like, *deep-soul, mid-shower-philosophy* level bothered me.

So, I made a decision.

No more of this “one rose per minute” nonsense. This wasn't a birthday party with hourly gifts. I wanted to do something real. Something that screamed, “You matter,”

I decided to collect all the roses and hand her the full bouquet in one single, glorious, cinematic moment—like a hero in slow motion with wind blowing through his hair.

But the moment I shared my idea, the boys went full panic mode.

“Don't ruin the fun, yaar!”

“Arey, the rose-per-minute plan is legendary!”

“Don't go all emotional Shahrukh on us now!”

And just like that, I was caught in a full-blown *Bollywood vs Brotherhood* crisis. Part of me wanted to honour the emotion. The other part didn't want to get roasted harder than hostel chai biscuits.

So there I stood, bouquet in hand, dreams in my eyes, and a bunch of idiots telling me to stick to the script.

I heard them out—really, I did. I nodded thoughtfully, gave a few “hmm”s and “maybe you're right”s, and even put on my most

diplomatic face. But deep down, a voice inside me whispered, *“Bro, you’ve got to do this your way.”*

So, I struck a deal.

Not one rose per minute like a malfunctioning flower dispenser.

Just **fifteen roses.**

A number that said, *“Hey, I care,”* but also *“I’m not completely out of my mind.”*

It was a compromise. A gesture. A small rebellion wrapped in thorns and sentiment.

And I made it very clear to the group:

**“This is it. Fifteen roses. Anyone got a problem? File a complaint in the nearest dustbin.”**

They groaned, rolled their eyes, and accused me of being “filmy,” but I stood my ground. My bouquet, my rules. Practical enough to keep the peace, dramatic enough to keep the legend alive.

And now, all I had to do... was deliver it.

As I approached Ruba like a man on a mission—with a bouquet of Roses.

The moment I handed her the roses, it was like watching a Bollywood scene unfold in real time. Her face lit up like Diwali rangoli. Gone were the clouds of sadness, replaced by a smile so bright it could’ve powered the CPU.(Central processing unit). She was glowing. Laughing. Blushing. Floating.

After few rounds and just like that, **Ruba officially became the Rose Queen**—a title so thoroughly earned, no one dared to challenge it. The crowd cheered, friends clapped, and somewhere in the distance, I swear even the pigeons on the college rooftop seemed to cool in approval.

But as the celebration bloomed around me—while Ruba twirled with her victory bouquet and everyone high-fived like we'd just won the Cricket World Cup—something inside me shifted.

Because suddenly, out of nowhere, **my mind wandered**... to someone else.

And with that thought came a weird little pinch in my heart.

A soft, unsettling nudge.

The kind that makes you smile on the outside... and squirm a little on the inside.

I raised my hand like a referee calling full time and announced, "Alright, folks—game over! Ruba wins. No more roses for anyone else. This isn't a charity, it's a stupid championship."

Everyone groaned and laughed, but I was already stepping away dramatically like a movie hero mid-exit.

"I'll be back in two minutes," I added, over my shoulder. "Don't start a civil war in my absence."

And just like that, I made my exit—part mysterious loner, part guy-who-just-remembered-he-left-his emotions charging somewhere else.

I practically jogged to Lavanyamayi, heart thumping like it was trying to beat a world record in cardio. I didn't know exactly what I was expecting, but *whatever it was*, reality absolutely demolished it—in the best way possible.

There she sat, like some Princess straight out of a modern-day fairytale, parked confidently in a chair that instantly looked too ordinary to be worthy of her. Beside her was a mini rose museum—roses of every colour, arranged so perfectly I half-expected them to burst into a romantic Bollywood song.

And then there was *her*.

Draped in a black saree that fit her like it had been stitched by the gods of glamour themselves, she looked... unreal. The fabric

flowed around her like it knew it was lucky to touch her. The shimmer caught the light just enough to make my jaw loosen and my brain momentarily switch to 'weed' mode.

I stood there frozen—half smitten, half stunned, and 100% unsure of how to act like a normal human being. She radiated calm and confidence, elegance and power, like someone who could fix your life and break your heart all in one sentence.

And me? I just stood there... blinking, like an idiot who forgot his lines.

I asked, "How many did you receive?"

She replied, why?.....hmm....."About 30-35."

I asked again, "30 or 35?"

She asked again, "Why? Did you bring some for me?"

I said, "No, just tell me."

Then she counted and said, "33 roses."

I went back to my friends and asked, "Ruba has won, right?"

Praval said, "Yes."

I asked, "By how many roses?"

Sheetesh said, "76."

"And who's in second place?"

Santosh replied, "That photosynthesis girl."(EVS girl)

"By how many roses?"

"61 roses."

I said, "Alright, divide the remaining roses into two parts and give me one."

Mission accomplished—flawlessly, if I may say so myself.

When I walked up to Ruba and whipped out *yet another* stunning bouquet, her face lit up like someone had just handed her

the moon wrapped in tissue paper. If happiness were a lightbulb, she was now visible from space.

That second bouquet tipped her tally well past the 110-rose mark—a number so outrageous, even the flowers were probably wondering if they were part of a world record attempt. Her eyes shimmered with tears, and for a second, it looked like she might break into a dramatic thank-you speech, complete with background music and slow claps from the crowd.

And me? I stood there soaking it all in, like a proud event manager watching the big finale go off without a hitch.

Then, holding the second bouquet like a hero holding his trophy, I turned to the gathering crowd and said with a grin, **“Don’t worry—I’ll be right back. Try not to overthink while I’m gone.”**

With that, I stepped away, my heart full and my head already thinking about the next act in this slightly absurd, wildly fun college drama.

Two hours later—after what felt like the emotional equivalent of aging five years—the big moment finally arrived: **winner announcement time.**

And just like that—**we knew!** Ruba stormed the leaderboard like a queen on a victory march.

With a sparkle in her eye and a bouquet that could flatten my jealous girls, she didn’t just win—she *owned* that competition. Her victory wasn’t some lucky accident. No, ma’am. It was the result of pure determination and criminal work of us.

While Ruba was basking in the glory spotlight, Lavanyamayi was quietly pulling off one of the slickest comebacks of the day. With the precision of a chess grandmaster and the cool of someone who probably reads mystery novels for fun, she surged ahead at the last minute—edging past the unsuspecting Environmental Science girl, who had no idea she was in a neck-and-neck race with a saree-clad strategist.

So Ruba took the crown.

Lavanyamayi took second.

And people were whispering...

Lavanyamayi's first reaction was nothing short of priceless. She stood there, bouquet in hand, looking as if someone had just handed her a treasure map and then vanished into thin air.

You see, I'd submitted the roses anonymously. That's right—full-on mystery hero mode. No name, no note, just a dazzling bouquet that screamed, "*Someone out there thinks you're spectacular.*"

The suspense wrapped around her like a shawl, elegant and intriguing. But then our eyes met.

And in that instant, the confusion on her face melted away faster than ice cream in a heatwave. Her lips curled into a smile so radiant it could've powered a small village. That one look—part surprise, part realization, part "oh, so *you* did this?"—made every petal, every silent second of planning, absolutely worth it.

She didn't say a word. She didn't have to.

That smile?

It said everything.

My friends—those nosy, popcorn-munching bystanders of destiny—were watching the whole thing unfold like it was the season finale of their favourite soap opera. No one said a word, but the dramatic glances flying between them could've formed an entire group chat titled "*Bro, did that just happen?*"

Ruba, though... Ruba wasn't like the rest.

While the others looked like they were still buffering emotionally, Ruba had already downloaded the situation in full HD. Her expression? Sharp as a detective who'd just cracked the case. She had the look of someone who knew **exactly** what was going on—and exactly who to blame.



And then... she started walking toward me.

Not storming. Not running. Just a calm, steady, slow-motion walk that somehow felt more terrifying than any full-blown rage. Her eyes locked on me with laser precision.

The crowd? Parted like the Red Sea.

The wind? Picked up.

My survival instincts? Packed their bags.

There was no panic in her steps. Just purpose.

And I knew—oh, I **knew**—this wasn't going to be a casual “Hi, how's your day going?” kind of chat.

It was time to face... *The Ruba Reckoning*.

Sensing the gravity of the situation, Mummy (Kumar) shook his head dramatically, sighed like a disappointed auntie at a wedding, and said, “बेटा, आज तो तू गया!” (“Son, you're done for today!”)

As I stood there, one simple, terrifying truth smacked me straight in the face like a rogue frisbee on a windy day: I was absolutely, completely, magnificently unprepared for everything that was about to happen.

A wave of panic swirled inside me—complete with dramatic mental violins—but I knew one thing for sure: standing there sulking like a sad potato wasn't going to help.

Regretting the past now? Useless. The moment was gone.

The metaphorical birds had already flown in, gobbled up all the crumbs, and probably left a mess behind too.

And just like that, it clicked.

The past? Gone. Locked away. Ghosted.

The present? A bit chaotic, yes—but still mine to grab by the collar and shake into shape.

So I took a deep breath, stood a little straighter, and told myself,

**“Alright, genius—no more moping. It’s time to march into the unknown like a slightly confused but determined explorer. Hopefully with fewer blisters and more snacks.”**

After what felt like a thousand years—and a hundred internal breakdowns—Ruba finally walked up to me.

And let me tell you, her face? It was *art*.

Like one of those abstract paintings people stare at for hours trying to decode: part confusion, part concern, part *“I’m two seconds away from either forgiving you or launching a flying kick.”*

Then she hit me with it. No. not kick, Just one word.

One syllable.

**“Why?”**

That was it. Just *“Why?”*

No drama. No raised voice. Just a soft, emotionally-charged *“Why?”*

And somehow, it was more terrifying than if she’d thrown the bouquet back in my face with a dramatic hair flip.

Now, most people think the hardest questions in life are things like, “What’s the meaning of existence?” or “What happens after death?” But no. The hardest question is “Why?” when asked by someone who looks like they might cry *or* punch you depending on your answer.

I stood there like a deer caught in high-beam headlights, mentally flipping through every dumb choice I’d ever made that led to this moment. The awkward silence between us thickened to the consistency of overcooked dal. Every heartbeat was a dead calm.

Should I be honest?

Should I crack a joke?

Should I run?

But one thing was clear: whatever I said next would either make everything better... or put me on Ruba's official "Rage" list.

So I cleared my throat, trying to sound wise and not at all like someone who just panicked over a single-word question.

And then...

I looked at Ruba and took a deep breath—the kind of dramatic pause you only see in movies right before the truth bomb drops.

"I owe a big thank-you to Lavanyamayi," I said, keeping my voice calm, steady, and just slightly noble. "She was there for me when no one else was. When college life hit me like a semester full of ragging, she stood by me. Without her support, honestly, I wouldn't even be in this college anymore."

Ruba's eyes widened slightly, but she didn't say a word.

"And sure," I continued, "if I'd wanted to, I could've made Lavanyamayi win. Easily. But I didn't."

I pointed gently—almost theatrically—at her crown.

"I still made sure *you* got to wear that Rose Queen crown. And you know why?"

She blinked, her expression softening into something caught between surprise, understanding, and a tiny bit of guilt.

I smiled and shrugged. "Because you deserved to feel like the queen today. Even if you almost turned one of my roses into a missile."

Ruba stepped toward me—not stormed, not strutted, but *glided* like she was auditioning for a slow-motion scene in a dramatic music video. Before I could process what was happening, she wrapped me in a hug so warm and gentle, it felt like I'd been swallowed by a giant emotional marshmallow.

Then, right there, while the world spun at regular speed, Ruba whispered something into my ear. Her voice was soft, barely louder than the rustle of a love letter, but it hit me like a lightning bolt straight to the heart. Her words—raw, real, and way too serious for a guy still recovering from garden-related trauma—left no room for misinterpretation.

“I love you” on a rainy train platform.

Meanwhile, I was standing there in the middle of this emotional circus, arms awkwardly mid-air, trying to decide whether I was supposed to hug back, faint from shock, or sprint toward the nearest exit.

But Ruba wasn’t letting go. And neither were those eyes—big, honest, sparkly eyes that looked like they’d been handcrafted to bypass all my defences. And in that moment, with everyone staring, cheering, possibly filming... saying “nah, I’m good” just didn’t feel like an option.

I mean, how do you walk away from someone who just confessed her love like a dramatic scene from *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*. The emotions were high. And I was somewhere between a fairytale and a hostage negotiation.

While Lavanyamayi stood a few feet away, cool as a mountain breeze.

She didn’t blink. She didn’t flinch. She didn’t join in. She just stood there like a graceful statue—if statues wore black sarees, had sharp observational skills, and could read the room better than the CCTV in the principal’s office.

Her face held a smile that was part Mona Lisa, part “I told you this would happen.” It wasn’t smug. It wasn’t sad. It was... satisfied. She didn’t need to be part of the chaos. She was above it, watching it unfold like a connoisseur at a fine wine tasting, except the wine was our emotional mess.

There was a sparkle in her eyes too—not the kind you see in romantic leads, but the kind you find in someone who knows *exactly*

what's going on and is quietly enjoying the front-row seat to the most entertaining love triangle since Bollywood discovered college campuses.

She didn't say a word. She didn't need to.

She just smiled....

## CHAPTER 7

# Litti Chokha

That winter in Patna arrived like an uninvited guest who not only barged in early but also forgot to knock. One day, people were walking around in cotton shirts, sipping chai in the sun, and the next—BAM!—the cold smacked the city like an alien from the sky.

Patna, nestled lazily along the banks of the mighty Ganga, is a city of extremes. In summer, the heat can roast your soul; in winter, the cold can freeze it right back. But what truly gives Patna's winter its villain arc is the famous '*Sheetlahari*' (*cold polar waves*)—a name that sounds oddly poetic but hits you like a slap of ice cubes down your back. Locals say it means "*Sheetlahari*," but that's like calling a tornado a "cold strong breeze."

The Sheetlahari doesn't just cool the air—it invades your bones, your thoughts, and even your dreams. Socks, sweaters, shawls—none of them stand a chance. It's the kind of chill where even the dogs stop barking and just curl up looking existential.

The cold got so serious that year, the government decided to intervene like a protective grandmother. They started distributing firewood at major street corners. Not warm soup. Not blankets. *Firewood* (*not small, large trunk of trees*). That's how old-school the fight against winter was. It was basically: "Here's some firewood. Good luck, beta."

By sunset, the city would transform into a smoky constellation of mini bonfires. Men with monkey caps pulled down to their noses, kids in oversized sweaters, and women with steel mugs full of tea would gather around these sacred little circles of fire. The flames flickered, chai boiled somewhere nearby, and conversations bounced

from cricket scores to politics to who got slapped at the local wedding last week.

And in that biting cold, something beautiful happened—people stopped rushing. They huddled. They joked. They passed peanuts and stories. Strangers became neighbours, and neighbours became bonfire buddies. That's the magic of Patna's winter.

Brutal? Absolutely. But also full of warmth, just not always the central-heating kind.

In this wonderfully unpredictable land, no season ever shows up quietly. Oh no—each one arrives like a full-blown action, making a grand entrance with drums, drama, and a flair for the theatrical.

Summer doesn't just warm up the place—it cooks it. The sun acts like it's taken a personal grudge against the city, determined to fry everyone like papad on a rooftop. You step outside and immediately feel like a tandoori version of yourself. Shade? What shade? Even the shadows feel like they're sweating.

Then comes winter. Not the cozy, fuzzy-socks, hot-cocoa kind. No. This is Bihar winter—cold with attitude. It doesn't gently nudge you into shivering—it sucker-punches you. The wind doesn't just blow; it hunts. It finds every hole in your sweater, every microscopic tear in your quilt, and slides in with the smugness of a thief who knows exactly where the valuables are.

You could be wrapped in three sweaters, two shawls, and your grandmother's prized rajai (quilt), and still feel like a popsicle with identity issues. Your nose runs like a student from an exam hall, and your breath fogs up the air like you're in a budget horror movie titled *'The Cold That Wouldn't End'*.

And just when you think you're safe, you have to leave for college. Getting out of bed is a heroic act worthy of medals. You drag yourself, wrapped like a walking quilt, out into the icy outdoors—only to realize that no number of layers can defeat the Sheetalhari. It sneaks in through your ears, down your spine, and settles deep inside your soul.

The seasons here aren't just weather—they're full-blown emotional experiences. Summer wants to roast you, winter wants to freeze your will to live, and in between, spring and autumn show up briefly like cameos in a long-running family drama.

But we survive. We snuffle, we shiver, we sweat—but we survive. Because that's just how it is in this mad little corner of the world. The climate might not want us comfortable, but at least it keeps things... interesting.

By the time the academic year was limping toward its grand finale, our little gang had become something of a legend on campus. Not the viral-scandal kind of legend, thankfully—but the respected, borderline-heroic kind that seniors nod at and professors pretend not to play favourites with.

Month by month, assignment by assignment, event by event—we had hustled, juggled, and occasionally faked confidence until we actually became good at things. Somewhere along the way, our names started popping up in places that mattered. “Get them onboard,” someone would say during planning meetings, and before you knew it, we were the go-to squad for anything slightly difficult, mildly creative, or dangerously last-minute.

Need someone to organize a tech fest in two days? Call us.

Need a poster that doesn't look like it was made by a weed smoking fox? Call us.

Need to diplomatically tell the principal that the annual budget mysteriously vanished into “food arrangements”? Yep, still us.

We weren't just a group of students anymore—we were *the* group. The all-purpose, multi-talented, panic-proof Avengers of our college corridors. People actually started using phrases like, “You guys are the backbone of this place,” which was flattering until we realized it also meant *more work*.

But we didn't mind. (Okay, sometimes we did. But we grumbled together, and that made it bearable.) We liked being useful. We liked being needed. There was something oddly satisfying about fixing



things, solving chaos, and pulling off the impossible with just an ordinary things, sometimes extra ordinary things, and one highly caffeinated brain.

And honestly? It felt good—really good—to be known not just for who we were, but for what we made happen. We had carved out our spot in the college story—not in bold capital letters, maybe—but definitely in thick permanent marker.

As winter started creeping in—quiet at first, then with all the subtlety of a slap—our gang faced the season’s usual threats: frozen fingers, shrinking attendance, and the terrifying possibility of actually catching the 6:45 a.m. class. That’s when Sheetesh, the unofficial philosopher-king of our group, announced a plan that, according to him, would “change our lives.”

“Morning walks,” he declared one foggy evening, like he’d discovered fire. “We’ll jog to college every day. Think about it—we save money *and* stay fit!”

We stared at him, hoping he was joking. He wasn’t.

With great enthusiasm and disturbingly detailed logic, Sheetesh explained the many “*scientifically proven*” benefits of his master plan:

We wouldn’t have to spend a single rupee on auto rickshaws.

Jogging would warm us up, saving us from turning into human ice cubes.

We’d arrive at college already energized and mentally sharp.

And most importantly—he paused here for dramatic effect—we’d all get abs by the end of the semester.

It was such a beautiful dream, we almost believed him.

**The next morning**, half-asleep and bundled up like burritos, we stumbled out of our hostel and attempted Sheetesh’s revolutionary idea. The first few minutes felt like walking through a freezer. Our noses ran, our ears froze, and our legs protested in a

language only pain understands. At some point, Jimmy tripped over his own blanket-cape, and someone swore their lungs had turned into popsicles.

“This is *health*?” I wheezed. “This feels like punishment.”

But Sheetesh jogged ahead, full of Olympic determination, shouting back gems like, “Pain is temporary, fitness is forever!”

Despite our whining, there *was* something oddly magical about it all. The fog made the world look like a dream sequence, the tea stalls were waking up, and old uncles doing yoga in parks cheered us on like we were national athletes. And by the time we reached college, panting and half-frozen, we weren’t just awake—we were *alive*.

Sure, we still hated the cold. We still missed our warm beds. But for a few shining mornings, we felt like warriors in thermals, conquering winter one jog at a time.

Sticking to the grand plan—crafted with all the excitement of a New Year’s resolution—we set off on our morning jog to college like a bunch of motivated penguins. The cold air slapped our faces awake, but we pretended it was “invigorating.” It was, after all, *part of the experience*.

With each step, our bodies slowly warmed up (well, except our noses, which stayed frozen solid), and soon, the grumbling gave way to grins.

The city was just beginning to stir—tea stalls clinking to life, sleepy uncles stretching in tracksuits older than we were, and the sun lazily peeking over the rooftops like it, too, wasn’t quite ready to face the day.

But we were out there—jogging, talking, laughing, and occasionally stopping to dramatically gasp for breath. The conversations flowed as easily as the sweat didn’t (because let’s be honest, it was still *cold*). We shared everything from bizarre dreams

to class gossip to philosophical debates like, “If we’re jogging to college, does this count as attendance?”

And somehow, this daily jog stopped being about saving money or staying fit. It became a ritual—our moving morning hangout. A time when we weren’t just students rushing to class, but a weird little tribe with frozen ears and warm hearts, owning the chilly streets like they were our personal running track.

In winter, Patna doesn’t just cool down—it vanishes. Fog rolls in like some overenthusiastic stage crew trying to set the mood for a horror movie, and suddenly, you can’t see more than five feet ahead. It’s not walking through the city anymore—it’s *guessing* your way through it.

The air? Oh, it’s not just cold. It’s *spiteful*. It bites your nose, numbs your fingers, and wraps around your ears like it’s trying to win a wrestling match. And just when you think you’re adapting, the pollution joins the party—thickening the fog until the whole city feels like a giant unwashed mirror.

And yet... we jogged.

Every single morning, like characters in an inspirational montage with no music and frozen eyebrows, we kept at it. Eyes squinting, scarves flapping, we ran through the fog like warriors charging into a cloud that smelled vaguely of burnt diesel.

People warned us. “You’ll fall into a drain!” “You’ll catch pneumonia!” “You’ll disappear in mystic fog and never return!” But we kept jogging, slipping past stray cows and barely avoiding vegetable carts that emerged from the mist like old chariots.

It was madness, yes—but it was *our* madness. We began to love that eerie, muffled world where the city whispered instead of shouted. Where the cold glued us together and made our little jogging ritual feel like a secret mission.

And somewhere between chattering teeth and fogged-up glasses, we realized this: we weren’t just braving the winter—we

were making memories in it. Cold, hazy, slightly wheezy memories. But memories nonetheless.

Somewhere along our foggy jogging route, we discovered a tiny tea stall—more of a glorified wooden box with a kettle, really—but it soon became the most important pit stop of our entire journey. What began as a “let’s just warm up a bit” quickly turned into a sacred ritual, an unspoken rule of the road: **No chai, no motivation.**

This little joint had no name, no signboard, and absolutely no sense of hygiene—but my god, the tea was magic. Hot, sweet, and somehow able to warm your soul through three layers of thermals. The smell of freshly brewed chai danced in the cold air, guiding lost joggers and sleepy students straight to salvation.

We’d huddle there, hands wrapped around hot steel cups, blowing on the surface like it was liquid gold. The conversations flowed just as easily—college gossip, wild theories, fake career plans, and the occasional dramatic retelling of a dream someone swore was “definitely symbolic.”

A few among us, channeling their inner rebels, lit up cigarettes with the air of misunderstood poets. The combination of chai steam and cigarette smoke gave the whole place a cinematic, slow-motion feel—like we were in a black-and-white art film titled *‘The last fog’*.

And once we were done—tea sipped, jokes cracked, lungs (mildly) poisoned—we’d toss the empty earthen cups into the nearby bin (or near it, depending on aim), stretch like warriors preparing for battle, and hit the road again.

With the caffeine, tannin and may be little bit of opium (tea vendor mixes with tea leaf) kicking in and our spirits rekindled, we jogged off toward college, laughter echoing behind us and hearts oddly full. The fog, the cold, the chai, the drama—it all became part of our morning symphony. And in that strange, sleepy stretch between home and the first class, we found something that felt a lot like friendship—and maybe just a little bit like freedom.

It was one of *those* mornings—foggy, cold, and the kind that makes you question all your life choices, especially the one where you agreed to jog instead of sleep. Still, there we were—me, Sheetesh, and two of our fellow half-awake companions—puffing along our usual route through Krishna Puri Park.

The air was so crisp it could've passed for a snack, and the path ahead was wrapped in that classic winter mystery—trees melting into fog, leaves crunching underfoot, and the faint hope of chai at the end of it all.

Then, it happened.

We rounded a bend, and suddenly—BAM. Sheetesh and I stopped dead in our tracks. It was like someone had pressed the universal pause button. No warning, no explanation—just two grown men frozen in place like we'd forgotten how legs worked.

The two guys behind us, clearly confused but very obedient, skidded to a halt too. And for a moment, we all just stood there, mid-step, mid-breath, mid-winter.

The scene must've looked straight out of a children's game—*Statue!* That was the name. The one where you'd freeze on command and only move when someone yelled "Release!" The four of us unintentionally recreated it, only now with fog, grown-up bodies, and slight joint pain.

No one spoke. Not because of the drama or tension, but because we were too stunned... and mildly embarrassed. But also, there was something weirdly beautiful about it—the cold air, the silent trees, the stillness, and the sudden flashback to being kids with muddy knees and zero responsibilities.

In that frozen instant, the park, the college, the winter—all of it faded into the background. It was just us and a strange, nostalgic quiet, as if the universe had whispered, "Remember who you were?"

And then, as if on cue, one of the boys behind us muttered, "So... are we playing statue or are you two just broken?"

In that bizarre, goosebump-raising moment, time hit the brakes like a scooter dodging a cow. Even our breathing went off-script—short, choppy, and completely uncoordinated. We stood there, frozen, not from the cold this time, but from pure, wide-eyed shock.

Because what we had stumbled upon was... unbelievable. Forbidden. *Absolutely-not-meant-for-our-eyes* kind of stuff. The sort of thing that immediately makes your brain go, "*Nope nope nope*," while your legs politely ask, "*Should we run or pretend to faint?*"

The four of us exchanged the kind of glances that said, "*Are we seeing this? Are we actually seeing this? And does this mean we're going to die?*"

We weren't just standing near trouble—we were hugging it. Our hearts pounded like they were trying to file a complaint. The fog around us suddenly felt like a stage curtain, and we were standing dead centre in a scene we didn't rehearse for. One wrong move, and the universe might hand us a disciplinary hearing.

We looked at each other—no words, just sheer *what-do-we-do-now* panic behind our eyes.

And there it hung: the unspoken question.

*Do we walk away like innocent joggers who saw nothing? Or do we become the idiots who explore and inevitably regret it?*

As something strange yanked our attention like a slap from the universe. There was a guy sitting on a motorcycle up ahead—cool as a cucumber, like he was just chilling, maybe waiting for a friend or a dramatic wind to blow his scarf. But even from a distance, something about the whole setup screamed, "*This is not normal.*"

Next to him stood another bike, its engine on, but its vibe screaming *main villain entry*. Two men were on it, dressed head to toe in black—as if they were auditioning for a MIB movie or had confused Patna for **Gotham City**. And then we saw it. **The gun.**

Yes, *a gun*. As in, metal, scary, very real, and currently being held to the first guy's head and we'd accidentally jogged onto the set.

The guys with the gun turned to look at us. And boy, if looks could kill, we'd be six feet under next to a flower pot. Their eyes scanned us—four sweaty college boys in hoodies and jogging shoes, probably looking more confused than threatening.

For one dramatic moment, we all just... stared. They at us. Us at them. Nobody blinked. Nobody breathed. It was a Mexican standoff, minus the cowboy hats and plus a lot of visible panic.

No one said it, but the vibe was clear:

**They:** "Who the hell are these clowns?"

**Us:** "Can we go back?"

**Also us (internally):** "WHY ARE WE HERE? WHAT IS HAPPENING?!"

The fog around us thickened, the world faded out, and all that remained was this bizarre, silent showdown—like someone had mixed up the script for a crime thriller and a life tragedy.

And in that silence, one thought echoed loudest: *What on earth do we do now?*

It felt like one of those dramatic moments people always gush about—*love at first sight*, they call it. But this? Oh no, this wasn't that. This was something much darker. If love at first sight makes your heart flutter, *this* made it stop completely. It wasn't *love at first sight*—it was more like *murder at first glance*.

The air around us got weirdly heavy, like someone had turned the atmosphere to "pressure cooker" mode. You could practically *taste* the tension—part fear, part fog, part "why did we leave the hostel this morning?"

The two guys on the second bike weren't just holding a gun—they were holding the *plot*. Everything about the moment screamed

“thriller,” except we were very much not the heroes. We were the background extras who’d taken a wrong turn into the climax.

There was this bizarre mash-up of feelings: like someone had tried to blend a romantic first meeting with a crime documentary.

Our brains didn’t know whether to swoon or scream, so instead, we just stood there—awkward and wide-eyed, breathing like we were auditioning for a role in *"Scared Statues: A Silent Horror."*

Time slowed to that annoying slow-motion pace usually reserved for dreams or bad decisions. Honestly, it wasn’t bravery that kept us frozen. It was pure, grade-A confusion. The kind that makes you question your life choices and your jogging schedule in the same breath.

There we were—stuck in a moment so tense, even the fog seemed nervous. The four of us stood like mannequins caught in a robbery, our brains spinning faster than our legs, but our bodies firmly refusing to budge.

Do we run?

Do we stay?

Do we pretend we’re are blind and just *breathe deeply until they go away?*

The idea of making a run for it definitely crossed our minds—*bolt into the mist, disappear like magician.*

But one problem: if we ran, they’d *know* we saw everything. And judging by the casual way they were holding that gun, we had zero faith in their commitment to letting witnesses live.

The last thing we wanted was to make eye contact and accidentally sign our own death warrants.

These guys weren’t your everyday scoundrels. No dramatic speeches. No villain monologue. Just the kind of cold, expressionless



faces that screamed: *"We've done this before and didn't even skip breakfast afterward."*

And that's when it really hit us—the scary part about murder isn't just the violence. It's the randomness. It's not always some grand plan or deep motive. Sometimes it's just a bad day, a twitchy finger, and few unlucky joggers at the wrong place in the wrong morning routine.

I could practically hear my mom's voice echoing in my head:

*"Jogging, huh? Told you fitness was dangerous. Should've just slept."*

So we stayed put—half-statues, half-scarecrows, 100% terrified. We didn't blink. We didn't move. We barely even breathed.

Our only goal? Blend into the fog and pray the gunmen were nearsighted or just incredibly uninterested in sweaty, shivering college students. Because in that kind of moment, there's no heroism. There's no bold leap. There's just pure, unfiltered survival instinct.

And ours said: *Don't. Move. A. Muscle.*

Staying put didn't exactly feel like the safest option either. If running meant *certain death*, then standing there like confused extras in a crime scene felt like *death, but slightly slower*.

Our brains were on fire, tossing back and forth the same two thoughts on a loop:

**1. Run and risk getting shot.**

**2. Stay and... *still* risk getting shot.**

We were basically caught between a panic attack and a potential obituary.

The real horror wasn't just that gun—it was the man sitting on the first motorcycle, cool on the outside but (we assumed) absolutely freaking out inside. And the two guys on the second bike?

They looked like they'd done this before. Like this wasn't even their scariest Tuesday.

A voice inside my head, which I now realize was my "final-thoughts narrator," whispered, "*They'll take him out first. Quick, easy, no drama. Then they'll turn to us—four nervous noodles just standing there, pretending not to be involved.*"

It was all too easy to imagine: one sharp *bang*, one guy slumps over the bike. A second *bang-bang*, and college attendance: permanently 75%.

We weren't just standing in fog anymore—we were standing in *a giant cloud of anxiety*, waiting to see if we'd be allowed to jog into the next chapter of our lives or get written out entirely.

Every second felt like it was ten minutes long. The pressure was so thick, I'm pretty sure my hoodie started sweating.

The clock ticked in our heads—imaginary, of course, because no one dared to check the real time—and we just stood there, stuck between *fight*, *flight*, and full-on emotional meltdown.

It wasn't bravery. It wasn't strategy. It was four dudes playing the quietest, most terrified game of "please-don't-shoot-us" ever invented.

Just when we thought things couldn't get any worse, we looked back—hoping for backup, a plan, or at least someone to blame—and discovered that the two boys who were jogging behind us had *vanished* into the fog like ghosts with excellent survival instincts.

Gone. Poof. Zero loyalty, full ninja mode.

We couldn't even be mad. If the roles were reversed, we'd probably have evaporated too. Still, their disappearing act only made things worse. Now it was just *us*, standing in the mist like sitting ducks who'd misplaced their exit strategy.

And the guy with the gun? Still there. Still aiming. Still radiating the same energy as a volcano deciding whether or not to ruin a village.

He looked... conflicted. You could almost *see* the gears turning in his head. It was as if he was stuck between two options:

**“Should I shoot these clueless joggers?”**

**“Or should I just scare them”**

We, of course, were rooting for *breakfast*.

The tension hung so thick in the air you could slice it with a spoon. We were mentally rehearsing survival strategies—everything from sudden sprinting to dramatic fainting to yelling, *“We didn’t see anything! We’re just cardio enthusiasts!”*

The worst part? We didn’t know what would tip him off.

A cough?

A blink?

A nostril flare?

Who knew what tiny gesture might trigger a full-blown action scene?

And so we stood there, paralyzed in a foggy silence that screamed louder than a college principal during surprise inspections. Time slowed down again—like the universe was forcing us to savour every painful second of our indecision.

Just when the silence had stretched long enough to feel like it might outlive us all, one of the armed guys finally spoke.

And not in the way you'd expect—no yelling, no dramatic threats, no “Say your last prayers.” Nope. He said... *Litti Chokha*.

**“So,”** he drawled, voice dripping with sarcasm and menace like gravy over a bad decision, **“what do you all think about Litti Chokha?”**

**Should I go ahead and place an order for you two?**

**Or would you prefer a hot serving of bullets instead?”**

("तो क्या करें भैया, लिट्टी चोखा मंगवा दूँ सबके लिए? या फिर सीधे गोली चलाऊँ?")

He smiled. We didn't.

Honestly, under different circumstances, we *might* have said yes to the Litti Chokha.

But in this moment? Nope. No appetite. Just fear, sweat, and the faint sound of someone's knees clicking under pressure.

**"Why don't you all just get lost from here?"**

he finished, his voice suddenly sharp and ice-cold, like someone tossing a knife with a smile.

We didn't wait for a second invitation. Instinct kicked in. Dignity didn't. We nodded—too fast, too many times—mumbled something that was probably meant to sound like "Sorry-sir-we-saw-nothing-thank-you-bye," and backed away slowly, like bad actors trying to exit stage left without tripping.

The fog welcomed us like an old friend as we disappeared into it—shaken, confused, and really unsure if we'd just survived a crime scene... or accidentally skipped breakfast with the mafia.

But before the guy could even finish his bizarre monologue about *Litti Chokha and bullets*, something incredible happened—we **vanished**. Just like that.

No, seriously. *Poof!*

One second we were standing there like terrified statues, and the next... gone. Not a single footprint, not a goodbye, not even the faint scent of fear sweat left behind.

It was the kind of escape straight out of 'Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan*'—you know, those **Demons** who'd laugh maniacally and then just disappear into thin air like, "*Hasta la vista, mortals!*" Yeah, that was us.

It felt like we'd been wrapped in some divine invisibility cloak made of fog, fear, and adrenaline. One minute we were part of a very real, very life-threatening scene—and the next, we were just... wind.

We didn't just run. We *evaporated*.

Even the air around us seemed to hum with confusion, like *"Wait, weren't there four terrified joggers here a second ago?"*

And honestly, we couldn't believe it either. It was as if the laws of astrology paused for a moment and said, *"You know what? These poor guys have suffered enough. Let's bend reality a bit."*

We didn't look back. We didn't speak. We just kept moving—powered by sheer panic and whatever leftover oxygen we had.

With one final burst of effort (and a couple of wheezes), we jogged through the college gates, our feet hitting the pavement in perfect, bittersweet rhythm. And just like that, it hit us—**this was our last jog as students**. Ever.

No more foggy mornings. No more chai breaks. No more heroic sprints past stray dogs pretending not to be afraid.

We looked around the familiar campus—the cracked paths we'd nearly tripped on a hundred times, the sleepy trees that had watched us stumble by, the canteen that had never once opened on time—and suddenly, everything felt... heavier. Nostalgic. Like the soundtrack of our college life was reaching its final track.

We didn't need to say anything. The silence between us was filled with all the things we felt but couldn't quite put into words. Stuff like, *"Bro, remember that time we almost died near Krishna Puri Park?"* or *"Why does leaving jogging feel sadder than some breakups?"*

There was this quiet understanding between us—that we weren't just leaving behind a habit. We were leaving behind a *ritual*.

For a solid ten minutes, we just stood there... *panting*. Loudly. Like buffaloes who had just outrun a cyclone. Our lungs were trying to remember how air worked.

Our souls? Well, they had briefly exited the premises and were only now returning from whatever spiritual vacation they'd taken during the gunpoint episode.

The adrenaline that had pushed us to jog like Olympic sprinters suddenly decided to abandon ship. With it went our posture, our pride, and quite possibly a few brain cells.

We bent over, hands on knees, gasping like we'd just given birth to a new level of exhaustion. And just when we thought we could finally chill—

**There came Faticher.**

Full speed. Arms flailing. Face set in a mix of *“Did someone die?”*

He looked like a character straight out of a sports anime—only instead of saving the day, he was just sprinting toward three half-dead college kids who had clearly seen too much.

We watched him barrel toward us with the energy of a man who had either a very important message or had just realized he left his assignment at home.

Whatever it was, one thing was clear: we weren't the only ones riding the emotional rollercoaster that morning. And frankly, we were too tired to get back on.

His official name was Harish. But of course, because the universe loves chaos, **there were two Harish in our class.** And every time the teacher called out “Harish?” it was like pressing a buzzer at a game show—*both* would answer, in perfect stereo.

“Present!”

“Present!”

Cue confusion. Every. Single. Time.

Roll call became a laughter class. Even group discussions were like navigating a maze: *“Harish said that—no, the other Harish—no, no, not Bhojpuriya Harish, the one with the belly ring!”*

To restore order in the kingdom, we decided nicknames were our only hope.

The first Harish was a proud Bhojpuri enthusiast. His accent was as thick as mustard oil, his metaphors legendary, and his ability to insert a Bhojpuri punchline into any conversation was almost a superpower. He could speak English in Bhojpuri accent and could design a software in Bhojpuri. Naturally, we dubbed him “**Bhojpuriya.**” Problem solved.

The **second** Harish? Now he was a whole vibe.

Let’s just say, he wasn’t afraid to push fashion boundaries that most of us didn’t even know existed. He strutted into class in **jeans tighter than girl’s jeans** and crop tops that didn’t even pretend to cover his midriff. His outfits had more personality than some of our professors.

And to top it off—*literally and literally*—he had a shiny little **navel ring.**

Yup. A full-on belly button bling. The kind you usually see in dance numbers featuring item queens and not-so-sober uncles.

We never officially named him. He named himself—with every unapologetically fabulous outfit. And honestly? We respected the confidence, even if we needed sunglasses to deal with the fashion glare.

Thanks to his *ultra-lean* frame and a fashion sense that often made us question the laws of physics (and occasionally gravity), we lovingly gave him the nickname “**Faticher.**”

Now, we know what you’re thinking—“*Faticher*”?

Exactly! That’s what made it so perfect. A guy so thin he could disappear behind a lamppost, yet dressed like he was walking the ramp at a midriff-themed fashion show.

But for us, “Faticher” wasn’t just a nickname—it was a *vibe*. It captured everything we adored about him: his boldness, his

unapologetic individuality, and the way he added a splash of sparkle (sometimes literally) to our otherwise dull student lives.

He didn't just break fashion norms—he *waved at them from the other side* while wearing neon tights and crop tops.

And we? We just cheered from the sidelines and made sure the nickname stuck—loudly, proudly, and with all the affection in the world.

So, Faticher came *charging* toward us like a man being chased by either a ghost or canine. His footsteps thudded against the ground with such intensity, even the pigeons looked concerned.

He skidded to a halt right in front of us—bent over, gasping, hands on his knees, looking like he'd just finished a marathon without training. His crop top fluttered slightly in the breeze, his navel ring catching the morning light like it, too, was panicking.

We stared at him, wide-eyed and confused, unsure if he was about to pass out or deliver breaking news.

And then, between gulps of air, he gasped,

**“In the... in the classroom... in the classroom...”**

Now, normally when Faticher said something breathless like that, it was about someone macho guy or the canteen running out of samosas. But this time was different.

His face was serious. Like *serious-serious*.

That signature sparkle in his eyes was replaced with a mix of fear and fury—like someone had insulted both his sexy looks **and** his outfit at the same time.

We looked at each other, alarmed.

Whatever it was... we knew one thing for sure: This was **not** about attendance or new rule.



I waved him off and said, “**First catch your breath, you wretched Faticher.** If you drop dead here, people will say we murdered you because of your fashion sense.”

He nodded, still wheezing like a punctured cycle tire, then stood upright with the drama of someone delivering a prophecy.

“**There’s a ghost downstairs!**” he declared. “**In the old gallery! The one nobody goes near!**”

There was a pause.

Then Sheetesh, completely unfazed, squinted at him and said, “**And how exactly do *you* know that, genius? What is this—your daily tea with the zombie? Do ghosts consult you in bed time?**”

Faticher, wide-eyed and borderline offended, replied, “I *saw* it with my own eyes!”

To which Sheetesh deadpanned, “That’s rich. The same eyes that once mistook a skeleton model for a scary ghost?”

Faticher, still catching his breath like a malfunctioning air pump, finally managed to explain.

“I was walking past that creepy old gallery—you know, the one even spiders avoid—and I heard *something*.”

He paused for dramatic effect again.

“**Weird** sounds. Freaky. Disturbing. Like someone—or *something*—was doing things behind those locked doors that shouldn’t be done in any building not blessed by pandits.”

We stared at him, waiting.

“I mean, it wasn’t super loud,” he continued, eyes wide, “but loud enough to make all my internal organs tighten up like exam season. I didn’t wait to find out what it was. I *ran*. Straight to you guys. You were the only people nearby who looked both brave and expendable.”

Sheetesh rolled his eyes. “So, let me get this straight—you heard strange noises in a dusty corner of campus and your first thought was: **Ghost?**”

Faticher nodded like a child who’d just recited the alphabet and wanted a medal. “Exactly! It was either a ghost... or someone doing illegal Zumba in the dark.”

Honestly, the way he looked—hair messed up, eyes wild, shirt slightly twisted like he got caught in a cyclone—we believed *he* might have scared the ghost away.

Faticher’s words hit us like a mystery novel thrown straight at our faces—**confusing, thrilling, and way too interesting to ignore.**

A weird mix of fear and curiosity started bubbling inside us. Our hearts thumped, not just from the cardio we weren’t built for, but from the idea that there might actually be something *out there*. Something ghostly. Something spooky. Something... worth skipping first period for.

As absurd as it sounded—*a ghost in broad daylight*—we couldn’t shake the urge to check it out. Because let’s face it: nothing unites college students faster than the chance to be dramatic for no reason.

Sheetesh whispered, “Should we go?”

I replied, “Obviously. If there’s even a 5% chance that something supernatural is happening... I want front-row seats.”

We didn’t know if we were being brave, stupid, or just terribly bored—but that old, dusty corridor had officially been promoted from “avoid at all costs” to “urgent group adventure.”

So off we went, like a discount Scooby-Doo gang—armed with nothing but nervous energy, loud opinions, and Faticher’s wildly unreliable ghost-sensing abilities.

And honestly? We couldn’t wait to get haunted.

I turned to Sheetesh and said, **“Looks like God’s got a wild sense of humour today—first we escape murderers, and now Faticher wants us to die at the hands of a ghosts. Back-to-back thrillers. We must be on some divine reality show.”**

Sheetesh didn’t even blink. He just put his hands in pocket and said, **“Bro, I’m not interested in making eye contact with a ghost before breakfast. Count me out.”**

I gave Faticher a pointed look. **“You heard him. Now kindly get lost.** Go haunt yourself if you’re so desperate for paranormal attention.”

Then I added, **“Look, genius, I have zero interest in wrestling with a wandering spirit in the morning. If ghost-hunting is your hobby, that’s fine. But don’t drag us into your part-time show.”**

Faticher pouted like a ghost had just seen his cloth less photos.

“Fine,” he muttered. “But if you hear screams from the gallery, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Sheetesh rolled his eyes. “If we hear screams, we’ll assume you tripped over your fashion sense again.”

And with that, we turned around, fully prepared to return to the safety of chai, classes, and things that don’t try to murder yourself—*supernatural or otherwise*.

Faticher was now in full drama mode. He started grabbing our hands—then, because that wasn’t theatrical enough, went for our feet too. His eyes looked like someone had just cancelled his Goa trip.

“Please, yaar!” he begged. “Come with me! Just once!”

We tried to resist. We really did. But when someone starts touching your feet in public, there are only two options: give in, or start charging for blessings. So, against our better judgment and basic survival instincts, we got up and followed him.

He practically dragged us down the ground floor corridor like a man on a ghostly mission. The lights flickered (probably just bad wiring, but still spooky), and the further we went, the stranger things felt. At the very end of the hallway, we stopped outside the last room on the right.

And then—we heard it.

**Weird sounds. Really weird.** Like someone screaming into a haunted well and added background chanting.

Faticher turned to us, eyes wide.

“Now press your ears to the door,” he whispered, like some horror-movie tour guide.

“That’s the only way you’ll understand.”

Sheetesh raised an eyebrow. “Bro, if something inside is going to eat me, I’d rather not hear it happening in high definition.”

But curiosity had already kicked in. One by one, we leaned in, ears against the door, listening to what sounded like... well, we couldn’t say exactly. But it definitely wasn’t normal.

I leaned in, pressing my ear to the door, trying to decode the bizarre mix of thuds, moans, and... was that humming?

Just then, Sheetesh narrowed his eyes at Faticher and asked, **“Okay, fine, all this is great—but tell me one thing... What the hell were *you* doing near this last room, huh? No one comes here!”**

Faticher froze like a kid caught red-handed stealing from the fridge at midnight.

“I... I came here to use the washroom,” he stammered.

Sheetesh blinked. **“You were peeing in a classroom?!** Seriously?! What are you, a confused goat?”

Without waiting for an answer, he grabbed Faticher by the collar like a strict teacher catching a student cheating in class.

I quickly stepped in.

“Chill, man! Leave it. He’s obviously lying.

But right now, let’s figure out what’s making those weird noises before someone *else* wets their pants.”

Faticher adjusted his collar, looking both guilty and offended.

“For the record, I was looking for the washroom,” he muttered, “but this room called to me...”

“Yeah,” Sheetesh said. “Probably to tell you to get lost.”

After a few more moments of dramatic silence, wild theories, and Faticher’s ghost-hunting enthusiasm, we finally reached a **logical** conclusion.

“Let’s be honest,” I said. “The chances of an actual ghost dancing around this dusty old gallery at six in the morning are... well, about the same as us finding clean toilets on campus.”

The image of a ghost gliding around, arms raised like some spooky ballerina, was just too ridiculous. Even Sheetesh snorted.

So we switched tracks and leaned into a more *government-college reality check*.

“Maybe,” Sheetesh said, rubbing his chin like a detective in a B-grade thriller, “someone broke in. A real person. Like, to steal stuff.”

“Steal what?” I asked. “Broken desks and chairs that haven’t been wiped since Independence?”

“Well,” he shrugged, “this is a government college. Stranger things have happened. Maybe the poor guy got locked in while trying to smuggle out a rusty bench and is now stuck... haunted by his own bad life choices.”

It suddenly made more sense. Not ghosts—just some unlucky idiot trying to loot government furniture and accidentally trapping himself in the classroom of doom.

Classic.

We paused for a moment, staring at the door like it was the gateway to either glory... or a giant misunderstanding. Sure, the whole “ghost” theory had kind of fallen apart. But now a **new** idea had taken root—what if there was a **thief** in there?

A real one! In action! Stealing broken desks and ancient chalkboards of Medieval times!

Forget ghosts—**catching a live thief**? Now *that* sounded like an adventure worth skipping breakfast for. We all glanced at each other, our expressions saying: “This could be really stupid... but also *very cool*.”

Our eyes locked. No words. Just that silent, look of mutual madness.

And then—*decision made*.

With the seriousness of a commando squad about to breach a villain’s hideout, we lined up in front of the door.

Sheetesh counted down, whispering like he was narrating a heist movie: “**One... two... THREE!**”

We all kicked at the same time.

Well... two of us kicked. One of us (Faticher) panicked and did more of a half-hearted toe poke.

One half of the door swung open like it was welcoming us to greatness.

The other half? It couldn’t handle the pressure. It gave up on life entirely, the hinges groaning like they hadn’t been used since the dinosaurs dropped out of college and collapsed to the floor with a crash so loud it probably woke up the dead. *And maybe even the principal.*

A cloud of dust puffed into the air. Our hearts pounded. We squinted into the mysterious room, fully prepared to find a ghost, a thief, or possibly an alien doing yoga.

But no.

**Standing right there... was Judo.**

Yep. *Our* Judo.

Same wild hair. Same slightly confused expression. Same human version of a walking romance.

The air went out of the room like a balloon hit with a pin.

We stared. He stared. No one moved.

For a second, all our ghost-thief-murderer theories vanished, replaced by one collective thought: **“What the hell is *he* doing here?”**

And just like that, the mystery got even more mysterious... and a lot weirder.

Sheetesh turned to Judo, eyebrows furrowed in that classic *“Bro, explain yourself”* expression.

“What are *you* doing here?” he asked, half-expecting Judo to say he was ghost-sitting the place.

Judo opened his mouth, ready to spin whatever strange story he had loaded in his brain—but just as the first word escaped his lips...

**Jingle-jingle.**

A soft tinkling sound floated into the room. It was delicate at first—barely there. Like someone’s grandma was taking a casual stroll in invisible anklets.

But then it grew louder.

**JINGLE-JINGLE.**

The sound echoed off the walls, suddenly sinister—like a horror movie villain had decided to accessorize. The temperature seemed to drop. Goosebumps popped up like we were suddenly sitting inside a freezer.

Faticher's face drained of colour. He leaned in, wide-eyed, and whispered,

**"Ghost... ghost... behind us."**

Someone somewhere had clearly *not* been listening to their elders when they said, "Don't go looking for trouble early in the morning."

The room felt like it was holding its breath—and so were we.

And that's when it happened again...

Sheetesh asked, **"Bro. Enough with the mystery. Just tell us—who's standing in the dark behind you?"** His voice was a mix of fear, frustration, and that uniquely Indian tone of *"don't-make-me-call-your-parents."*

Judo blinked, clearly caught off guard by the pressure. He looked behind him. Then back at us.

He opened his mouth... paused dramatically... then finally said: **"It's Disha."**

There was a moment of silence. Total, stunned, awkward silence.

Sheetesh blinked. **"Disha?! From our class? The one who looks like tom boy and still walks like she's judging us all?"**

I stared at Judo. "You mean all that creepy anklet jingling... all this suspense... all the ghost drama—was *Disha?!\*\*\**"

Faticher's jaw dropped so hard it almost unhinged.

"I thought it was a spirit! Turns out it's just a girl wearing anklet *and no sense of timing!*"

Well, mystery solved. Kind of.

We still had no idea what she was doing creeping around a supposedly haunted classroom before sunrise—but at least she wasn't floating.



Yet.

**But** first, dear reader, let's rewind a little.

It's time to talk about **Disha**—because no spooky story is complete without a mysterious girl entering mid-semester with a perfectly timed dramatic aura.

About two months ago, on a totally normal morning, we spotted a bunch of boys clustered around the college notice board. Not just standing—they were practically vibrating with excitement, like they'd just seen India win the World Cup again.

Naturally, we strolled over. Curiosity is like free internet you can't resist connecting. As we leaned in, we saw it: a neatly printed notice about a **new student** joining us mid-semester.

Her name? **Disha**.

Her vibe? Mysterious.

Her impact? Immediate.

The notice wasn't just an intro—it was basically a fan club application form. There were detailed bullet points about her background, her transfer from another college, and even a few suggestions clearly written by an overenthusiastic professor:

*"Let us all welcome Disha warmly. Help her adjust. Offer guidance and be kind."*

By the end of it, we weren't sure if she was joining us as a student or if we were expected to adopt her as a collective emotional support group.

Either way, it worked.

She became the **talk of the campus** before even stepping foot in the classroom.

And one day she came, jingling ominously in a dim classroom at 6 a.m., singlehandedly terrifying four grown boys who had just kicked a door off its hinges.

College life, ladies and gentlemen.

The classroom that day wasn't just buzzing—it was practically *vibrating*.

**A new girl was joining the class.** Mid-semester. Heads turned. Eyebrows wiggled. Pens stopped writing. Even the guy who usually slept through lectures was suddenly *awake and alert*.

Excitement spread like a juicy rumour in a hostel.

Meanwhile, let's just say the current female population of the class... didn't quite inspire Shakespearean sonnets. Most of them were known more for their attendance than their elegance. The boys, bless them, had been quietly mourning the lack of "cinematic charm" in their academic lives.

But now?

Now there was **Disha**.

A name straight out of a daily soap. A hope wrapped in mystery and packaged with a transfer certificate. To some of the boys, she wasn't just a new student—she was a potential dream girl, the answer to their semester-long prayers for drama, grace, and (let's be honest) *someone pretty to look at during boring lectures*.

Speculations began flying faster than chalk pieces during a surprise test: "Do you think she's into poetry?"

"Maybe she's shy and wears glasses like in those makeover movies!"

"Nah bro, I bet she's confident and straight-up shuts down rude seniors."

Every guy had his own theory, his own silent dream. By the time the bell rang, half the class had already imagined slow-motion moments with her set to romantic songs.

The anticipation was thick enough to cut with a butter knife—and no one even knew how she *looked like* yet.

Ah, college boys. A breed powered by hopes, hormones, and half-cooked fantasies.

Finally, the big day arrived. The air was charged. Even the usually disinterested canteen guy had asked, “अरे आज कौन आ रहा है रे, जो इतना हल्ला-गुल्ला मचा हुआ है?” (“Who’s coming today that there’s so much commotion?”)

The boys were on edge, some even combing their hair without being told. Rumour had it someone ironed their jeans—for college. That’s the level of madness we were dealing with.

And then...

### **She appeared.**

Disha walked through corridor like a much-awaited guest appearance in a daily soap—minus the slow-motion, though a few boys imagined it anyway.

Heads turned. Elbows nudged. Whispers flew.

And then...

### **Reality hit.**

Hard, like iron rod between two legs. Like a chalk duster flung straight at your forehead by a frustrated professor.

You see, after all that anticipation, all those dreams filled with sparkly eyes and poetic walks in the corridor, it turned out that Disha... wasn’t *quite* what the boys had imagined.

She was half girl half boy. She didn’t glide. She stomped.

She didn’t giggle. She didn’t smile like a shy debutante.

Suddenly, the same boys who had been building castles in the air were desperately trying to sneak out of the conversation they hadn’t even had yet.

One of them muttered, “Bro, I think I like simplicity now. Like... Neha from accounts.”

Another whispered, “She reminds me of my elder brother. I’m scared.”

In a strange twist of fate, the girls already in our class—who the boys had previously ignored with the elegance of pigeons ignoring traffic rules—suddenly started to look *way more attractive*.

They were polite. They were soft-spoken. They didn’t look like they might headlock you during recess.

The social ecosystem? Flipped.

Disha didn’t just walk into college. She walked in and *rebooted* the entire boy-girl dynamic.

It was poetic. And mildly terrifying.

**Ok** now back to ghost event, **Judo dropped the D-word**.

“Disha,” he said casually, like he was talking about the weather.

The effect was **instant**.

Sheetesh froze.

His eyebrows shot up so high they nearly escaped his forehead. His brain clearly blue-screened for a second before he turned to Judo with the kind of face one makes after accidentally drinking salt instead of sugar in tea.

“**Disha?!**” he exclaimed, blinking like a confused pigeon.

“Wait a second—are you trying to tell me... you might have a *crush* on her?”

Or wait... do you like half *boys now?*”

He said it with a half-teasing, half-scandalized tone that made Judo flinch and roll his eyes at the same time.

The sheer impossibility of someone voluntarily *liking* Disha—*tough-as-nails Disha*, who looked like she did squats with people’s opinions and wore sarcasm like perfume—was clearly short-circuiting poor Sheetesh’s mind.

His go-to coping mechanism? **Sarcasm and nonsense.**

Classic Sheetesh.

But underneath the jokes, there was something else—**actual curiosity**. Because Disha was that type of wild card. No one knew whether to fear her, admire her, or avoid her.

And now Judo... Judo was possibly in **love** with her?

This wasn't just gossip anymore. This was *breaking news*.

And Sheetesh, despite all his dramatic disbelief, was officially hooked.

"No, man," Judo whispered, waving off the drama with his usual calm. "It's just time pass. Like... water is water—any kind of it can still put out fire."

He delivered it like a monk who'd just returned from a philosophy retreat in Bangkok.

Faticher, never one to miss a punchline, jumped in instantly.

"*Bhai*, people eat peanuts to kill time—not chase after Disha like she's a mystery box from a treasure hunt."

We burst out laughing. The kind of laugh that starts with a snort and ends in someone choking on their own spit. But we weren't done.

"Judo," I said, still holding back chuckles, "you don't need to be scared of anything here, bro. Let's be honest—Disha's not *yet* a complete girl."

Sheetesh nodded solemnly like a judge handing out a verdict. "You, my friend... deserve the **Bharat Ratna**. You're the *first* man on this planet who genuinely thinks Disha is a girl."

There was silence.

Then another explosion of laughter.

Judo just stood there, shaking his head like a man who knew he'd never hear the end of it—but was secretly proud of earning legendary status in our friend circle.

Look, jokes aside, let's just take a moment to drop the popcorn and actually think. We were walking a thin line—one that could've seriously messed up someone's life if things had gone even slightly sideways. Imagine if we weren't the heroes of this episode but just some random onlookers watching it all unfold.

Now picture the gossip factory going into overdrive, turning whispers into scandals, and suddenly—bam!—Disha's reputation would've been shredded like old newspaper.

So yeah, before you roll into our next “epic love scene,” how about a reality check?

Because here's the thing—while we're out here treating it like a college rom-com, real people get hurt. And no one would want their sister, cousin, or even a random friend getting dragged into something that could ruin her name just because some guy wanted to “kill time.”

Relationships aren't side quests. They come with consequences, responsibilities, and a decent dose of common sense—which, unfortunately, isn't always available in the boys' hostel pantry.

So next time your heart says “go,” maybe let your brain say “wait.”

Because being a decent human > being an opportunist.

Trust me. You'll thank yourself later.

I looked Disha straight in the eye and said with mock seriousness, “Look, you really shouldn't be showing up in places like this. If any of the professors spot you here, you'll be starring in tomorrow's hot gossip, and trust me, no one wants that kind of fame.”

With the ghost stories behind us and everyone's nerves slowly settling, we decided it was time for some fresh air—and emotional detox.

We wandered outside and flopped under the giant peepal tree near the campus boundary wall. The shade was perfect, the air was crisp, and for the first time that morning, we weren't dodging gangsters, ghosts, or gossip.

As we sat in a brief lull of peace, Sheetesh turned to me with the kind of expression that only comes when your brain's trying to untangle the mysteries of the universe—or at least, college crushes.

"Hey," he said thoughtfully, "do you think we made a mistake?"

I frowned. "What mistake?"

He sighed. "I mean... what did Judo see in Disha that we didn't?"

I shrugged. "If you're so desperate to find out, go ask her yourself."

He raised his hands defensively. "Whoa! Relax. I was just joking."

Then, without warning, he turned to Faticher and slapped him.

"Yaar, stop wearing that blouse in front of me," he groaned. "Every time I see you in the morning, my mood crashes like a Windows 98."

Faticher flicked his imaginary long hair and replied sassily, "Excuse me, this is called *experimental fashion*. You wouldn't understand."

## CHAPTER 8

# A Snake in the Bra

Inside our classroom, where education was supposed to bloom, a different kind of *growth* was taking place—mainly in the form of addictions. It was less "Path to Enlightenment" and more "Crash Course in How to take Marijuana."

A decent chunk of the boys had dedicated their lives to the noble art of chewing tobacco, their mouths constantly stuffed like squirrels preparing for winter. Another group had chosen cigarettes as their soulmate, puffing away like steam engines headed nowhere. And then there were the ones who had signed a full-time contract with Old Monk and McDowell's—finding "inner peace" at the bottom of a bottle.

But among these chaotic warriors of self-destruction, there existed a separate species altogether—the *highly elevated*. No, not morally—just literally. These were the marijuana philosophers, the accidental Monks of our batch. And leading this tribe was none other than Bhagat.

Ah, Bhagat! A man who didn't smoke weed. No, no. Weed smoked him. Morning, noon, and night—he was on a spiritual journey powered entirely by 'Ganja' fumes. There was a time when he was just a recreational user, the kind who lit up during birthdays or breakups. But those innocent days were long gone. Now it felt like the weed had *smoked him* instead.

Bhagat was brilliant—one of those rare minds that could probably invent a rocket engine using a junkyard. But there was just one tiny problem: his brain refused to function unless it had first been marinated in marijuana. Before class discussions, before viva



exams, even before asking for a second helping in the mess—one *puff* was mandatory.

We didn't know whether to admire him or write an intervention letter. But one thing was certain: if we ever need a brand ambassador in our college, Bhagat was already posing for the poster.

Bhagat had fallen head-over-heels for a girl from the Environmental Science Department—the department that, by sheer luck was located *right across* from our building, Shatavdi Bhawan. You couldn't ask for a better view unless you were in a surveillance drone.

Now, Bhagat wasn't your typical hopeless romantic. No candlelight poetry, no guitar-strumming under her balcony. His love story was more... observational. For over a year—yes, a whole calendar year—he had perfected the art of silent admiration. Every single day, like clockwork, he would stroll over to the Environmental Science building and just... watch her. Not in a creepy way (well, not *very* creepy), but with the intensity of a National Geographic cameraman tracking a snow leopard in its natural habitat.

Approaching her? That was a different story. Despite his legendary stoner wisdom and hours of balcony-based daydreaming, he couldn't muster the courage to say a single romantic syllable to her. Not even a "Hi." Not even a "Which section are you in?" Heck, even the squirrels in the campus park were braver with their crushes.

To feel somewhat connected, he made friends with a bunch of students from her department. That way, he could hang around and pretend it was all *purely academic interest*. He sat in their canteen, nodded thoughtfully during their soil erosion debates, and even laughed at their composting jokes. All while sneakily stealing glances at his dream girl from behind his dark sunglasses—like a stoned James Bond on a terribly slow mission.

But time marched on, and Bhagat remained stuck in the same emotional quicksand—madly in love, completely tongue-tied, and heavily dependent on his daily weed-and-watching ritual. It was less of a love story and more of a long-running tragic comedy... with bonus **chlorophyll**.

Our "relationship" with the Environmental Science students was about as warm and welcoming as a notice from the exam office. Cold, distant, and slightly uncomfortable. And honestly, we had no one to blame but ourselves.

You see, in our infinite wisdom, we had made a habit of mocking their field. To us, Environmental Science students looked less like a serious academic discipline and more like an extended labour work with attendance. Whenever we saw them collecting leaves, digging around in the soil, or examining tree bark with scientific expressions, we'd chuckle and call it "advanced-level gardening." Sometimes, crueller minds among us even whispered they were training to be government-appointed trash collectors.

They'd be wandering all over campus—botanical gardens, parks, random shrubs near the canteen—with bags full of leaves and plants, deeply involved in their lab work. But from our privileged position, it all just looked like elaborate garbage picking with a certificate at the end.

Needless to say, they didn't exactly roll out the green carpet for us.

Our mockery had built an invisible wall between the two departments—one side passionately preserving ecosystems, and the other side passionately bunking lectures. Mutual respect? Let's just say it was on the endangered species list.

Even Bhagat, with his growing "interest" in their department (love-struck surveillance), couldn't bridge the gap. The damage had been done. While they were busy saving the planet one sapling at a time, we were too busy planting jokes at their expense. And so, a potential interdepartmental friendship—possibly even a legendary

love story—remained buried under layers of misunderstanding, immature banter, and a very thick pile of compost.

There were times—far too many, honestly—when the boys crossed the line from harmless teasing to full-blown idiocy. One of their favourite pastimes was making jokes about the girls from the Environmental Science department. Not clever jokes. Not even creative ones. Just plain, rude, bush-level nonsense.

They'd see the girls collecting plant samples near bushes or poking around in the undergrowth for their lab work, and immediately the snide remarks would start flying.

"Careful! Snake might gave you love bite dear!"

"Look, look... professional rag pickers in action!"

To them, it was comedy gold. To everyone else with a functioning moral compass, it was just plain disrespectful. The term "rag picker"—thrown around so casually—wasn't just demeaning; it came with the stink of superiority, ignorance, and the kind of locker-room stupidity that should've been left behind in middle school.

Eventually, the girls had enough. Hurt and humiliated, they decided to bring it up with their teacher—hoping for some backup, some disciplinary action, maybe even an ounce of empathy.

What they got instead... was a motivational speech from the "Why Bother?" School of Problem Solving.

The teacher listened, sighed, and then with the weary tone of someone who's seen too many boys and too few brain cells, said, "Why waste your energy on them? They're just illiterate troublemakers, anti-social elements."

Then came the real gem:

"Reacting to them is like throwing stones into a drain. You'll only splash dirty water and still not unclog it." Oof. That stung more than the boys' comments.

The girls walked away, not just disheartened but downright invisible. They had braved the bushes, dodged mosquitoes, faced creepy crawlies in the name of science—only to be mocked by boys and dismissed by their teacher.

And us? We just carried on, none the wiser, like the human version of a drain: noisy, messy, and completely resistant to change.

Despite the teacher's stern warnings—and the not-so-subtle comparison to clogged drains—the boys didn't just ignore the label "anti-social elements." No, they *embraced* it. With pride. Like it was some kind of honorary title handed out for bad behaviour and poor impulse control. You'd think they'd been awarded medals for mischief in a convocation ceremony chaired by the Principal of Chaos.

"Anti-social elements," they repeated to each other with glee, as if they'd just been inducted into an elite gang of rebels. "Sounds so official, yaar," one of us grinned. "Like we should have our own logo."

Their favourite pastime? Mocking the Environmental Science girls, of course. The harder the girls worked, the louder the boys laughed. Comments flew freely, most of them immature, some downright mean:

"Arrey, look at them! Cleaning bushes again—botany meets municipal duty!"

"Is that a lab coat or a gardener's uniform?"

"Careful—don't fall in love with a compost pit!"

To them, the girls' dedication was nothing more than entertainment. A live-action eco-drama playing out in the garden while they munched peanuts and tossed around half-baked jokes. Some of the girls, tired of the nonsense, started to push back—firmly asserting their right to work without being treated like walking punchlines. But every comeback only added fuel to the boys' fire.

"Ohhh! Did she just talk back?" one would whisper loudly.

“Bold! Should we give her a standing ovation?” another would smirk. It was classic schoolyard logic: annoy, provoke, watch reactions, repeat. And just when you thought it couldn’t get worse—cue *that* sunny afternoon.

A few of our boys decided it was the perfect day to visit the garden—not for research or appreciation of nature, of course—but to collect flowers and leaves for... reasons best described as “creative mischief.” Within minutes, they were tiptoeing through the flower beds like underqualified florists on a sugar rush.

Meanwhile, the Environmental Science girls were hard at work nearby, knee-deep in bushes, collecting trash and cataloguing specimens to keep the place clean and green. It was real, sweaty, dedicated work.

Naturally, our boys couldn't resist.

“Wah! What dedication! Even the plants must be saluting them!”

“Why don’t they just open a nursery and end the suspense?”

One fine afternoon, what was supposed to be a chill, harmless chat turned into a full-blown drama episode—starring none other than Bhagat, the unofficial ‘Ganja Guru’ of our hostel, and a girl from the Environmental Science squad.

It all started innocently. A bit of back-and-forth banter, a casual debate, a sprinkle of sarcasm—just your typical college gossip session. But little did anyone know, Bhagat had arrived at the scene heavily “inspired.”

He had, that day, consumed enough marijuana to tranquilize a small buffalo. His eyes were half-closed, his speech slightly floaty, and his brain operating on a different frequency—possibly FM Bhagat infinity.

Now normally, Bhagat was the silent, dreamy type when high—someone who'd stare at a beautiful girl and whisper, “Bro... photosynthesis is real and sexy.” But on this particular day, the stars

aligned differently. Something in the conversation clicked a wrong nerve.

Maybe it was a sarcastic comment.

Maybe it was the way she raised an eyebrow. Or maybe it was the way chlorophyll was disrespected—who knows?

Whatever it was, Bhagat *snapped*.

He sat up straighter, flung his half-eaten biscuit aside like a protest gesture, and entered the argument like a stoned warrior defending his honour.

What began as a mild disagreement turned into a shouting match that could've easily been mistaken for a courtroom drama—if the courtroom had been under a neem tree, and the lawyers were high. Bhagat argued with great passion, albeit slightly off-topic at times.

Girl: "You can't just mock our work!"

**Bhagat:** *"Nature thrives on balance—and you all keep disturbing it every day, causing global warming."*

The girls, of course, were not the type to back down either. They matched his energy word for word, bringing logic, emotion, and volume. It didn't help that some of them had a natural flair for drama—every retort was delivered with the intensity of village level fight. And so, the argument spiralled.

Voices rose.

Hands flailed.

Even the crow sitting on the tree flew away, thoroughly annoyed.

The once-friendly circle now looked like a mini-parliament in session, with Bhagat in the role of Opposition Leader, powered by Marijuana. By the end of it, no one remembered what the original topic was. Not even Bhagat. But everyone remembered *the moment*.

The day the quiet stoner went full revolutionary. Things took a sharp left turn when the girl—clearly fed up with Bhagat’s weed-fuelled arguments, whipped out her phone and called reinforcements. And not just *any* reinforcements. She called her ‘**big brother**’.

Now here’s the twist: her brother was from the **Arts Department**.

For those unfamiliar with our college ecosystem, the Arts Department wasn’t just a department—it was a *mood*. A full-blown, swagger-filled, **testosterone**-charged territory where the boys were more into dramatics than drama class and treated academic attendance like an optional hobby. They were the unofficial campus mafia of *midday naps, muscle flexing, and mass bunking*.

When Arts boys studied, it was only because:

1. Their crush was in class.
2. Their parents were visiting.
3. Internal marks were at stake—and even then, it was touch and go.

Most of their energy was spent on activities like rehearsing street plays, organizing student protests against things nobody fully understood, and of course—**getting into fights**.

Their motto? *Why solve problems peacefully when you can solve them with chest-thumping and a group of mad buffalos?*

So, when Bhagat ended up arguing—loudly—with a girl whose brother belonged to this illustrious clan, you didn’t need to be an astrologer to predict a storm was coming. He might as well have announced it on the notice board:

**"Today’s forecast: 99% chance of punches with scattered yelling."**

You see, the Arts Department didn’t just have students—they had *loyalty*. A single shout from a classmate, and five dudes with

rolled-up sleeves would appear like magic, ready to defend honour, friendship like pack of wolves.

So, calling that brother? That was like launching a missile in retaliation.

Bhagat, of course, had no idea what he'd just triggered. He was still passionately explaining something about spiritual energy and biodiversity to the birds in the nearby tree, blissfully unaware that his words were about to be met with fists powered by B.A. degrees and endless free periods.

In short, arguing with an Environmental Science girl was risky. Arguing with *an Environmental Science girl whose brother was in Arts?* That was basically campus-level suicide.

By the time the girl finished venting, her brother had activated the **Arts Department Bat-Signal**. Within minutes, every sketch-book-carrying, beard-stroking, midway-through-a-slam-poem Arts boy on campus assembled like Avengers who'd majored in Menace. They marched toward Environmental Science, cracking their knuckles and throwing around local bad words with excitement.

Poor Bhagat never saw them coming.

One moment he was still explaining “positive vibes”; the next he looked up to find fifty–sixty Arts warriors forming a perfect Troy -style circle around him. African tribal drums might as well have played in the background.

Instinct took over.

### **Bhagat hit Top Gear.**

He blasted past us—hair flying, slippers flapping—while the Arts herd thundered behind him like a discount Polo match.

We, naturally, were loving the live entertainment—until we realized our mate was about to be turned into abstract art. Panic! Heroism! Adrenaline!



We scattered in all directions recruiting reinforcements:

- BBM lads—always ready because their lectures are 90 % group discussion anyway.
- BCA coders—dragged out mid-Counter-Strike match, still clutching snacks.
- Random—recruited on the promise of “best fight ever, bro!”

Within ten minutes the college looked like a casting call for **“Gangs of Washeypur: Hostel Edition.”** Rough head-count? Two hundred-plus, easily—an eclectic mob ranging from commerce calculators to computer-science caffeine addicts, all converging on the football field. And then... **kaboom.**

The beautiful green pitch transformed into complete mayhem: Arts boys swinging tote bags like nun chucks, BCA dudes attempting “CTRL+ALT+DEL” on people, BBM guys negotiating mid-brawl (“Bro, quick ROI on that punch, okay?”). Insults flew faster than footballs, and somewhere a bewildered PE instructor tried to whistle everyone into time-out—only to lose his whistle to a flying sneaker.

For a glorious, chaotic half-hour, the entire campus united—in the worst possible way. And it all began because Bhagat, our resident Weed Philosopher, couldn’t keep his cosmic commentary below 420 decibels.

College memories, right? Some people collect certificates; we collected riot footage.

The chaos unfolding in front of my eyes didn’t look like a college scuffle anymore—it looked like someone had ripped a page straight out of the **Mahabharata**, shaken off the dust, and dropped it right onto our football field. If you’d squinted just a little, you could almost see Bhishma Pitamah shouting battle commands near the goalpost, Arjun aiming his bow from the canteen roof, and Lord Krishna casually floating inn air giving life advice.

It was pure **Ramanand Sagar realness**.

All that was missing was the slow-motion camera, the dramatic background score—“*Mahaaabhaaraa...!*”—and a conch shell blowing somewhere behind the mess building.

On one side: the angry, theatrical warriors of the Arts Department, charging ahead like they’d been promised lead roles in a mythological serial.

On the other: our ragtag Avengers—BBM boys, BCA coders, random hostel boys, and Bhagat’s loyal fans—defending their teammate as if he were a precious relic from a sacred text. Everywhere you looked, there was action:

- Hockey sticks flew like chakras.
- Backpacks swung like maces.
- One dude even came in with a cricket bat, clearly confused but fully committed.

The air buzzed with shouting, war cries, and the occasional “*Abe maar mat! Internal viva hai kal!*”

It wasn’t just a fight. It was a *saga*.

And standing there, taking it all in, I couldn’t help but think:

*This? This is not just a college brawl. This is Dharma vs Karma, semester-style.*

Honestly, if Door darshan had shown *this* version of the Mahabharata, it would’ve gotten TRPs off the charts—plus an FIR or two.

In the middle of all that madness—shouting, slipper-throwing, and emotional background scores—it became *impossible* to tell who was with us and who was out for blood.

Everyone looked the same: dishevelled hair, rolled-up sleeves, angry expressions, and a backpack weaponized like a medieval

shield. In that haze of chaos, we threw logic out the window and replaced it with a foolproof system:

**“If we don’t recognize the face, punch it—just to be safe.”**

Tragically, this brilliant strategy backfired faster than a cheap scooter.

Several poor, unsuspecting Science students—who’d simply come outside for fresh air or maybe to check if the samosa stall still had chutney—found themselves **accidentally drafted into our war**. One second they were solving chemical equations in their heads, the next—they were dodging elbows and yelling, “भैया, मैं तो फ़िज़िक्स का हूँ!” (“Brother, I’m from Physics!”)

It was pure panic. We were flinging arms and confusion in every direction. Faticher got slapped for wearing the “wrong t-shirt.” Another guy caught a flying notebook mid-air and yelled, “मुझे बस लाइब्रेरी जाना था, यार!” (“I just wanted to go to the library, man!”)

By the end of it, the Science boys were traumatized, confused, and probably questioning their life choices.

And we? Well, we were still trying to figure out if we’d accidentally declared war on the Arts Department. Let’s just say... it was not our proudest moment.

Note to self: next time a campus battle breaks out, maybe make *team jerseys* first. Or at least carry ID cards.

After a solid fifteen minutes of all-out mayhem—slippers flying, friendships breaking, and innocent bystanders crying for their lab coats—a strange silence began to creep in. Not because people were tired, but because **the administration had finally arrived**.

A fleet of teachers, peons, and one extremely nervous warden marched in like UN peacekeepers—clipboards in hand, whistle at the ready, and expressions that screamed, “*What in the fresh hell is going on here?*”

Naturally, we greeted them with... defiance.

One of us—probably someone who had just watched too many gangster movies—stepped forward and declared, “**Sir, please. We got this.**”

Yes, *we told the admin to step aside* like we were trained diplomats negotiating an international ceasefire.

No thanks, we said. We don’t need counselling.

We don’t need rules.

We just need five more minutes and an uninterrupted round two.

To really drive the point home, someone even added: “**If you don’t back off... we’ll settle things with you first.**”

There was a moment of *cinematic tension*. A long pause.

You could practically hear the rustling of the grass, the fluttering of someone’s torn notebook, and the sound of one teacher swallowing his whistle in shock.

And then, something unexpected happened.

**Both sides blinked.**

The admin realized we weren’t going to back down easily. We realized the admin had the power to cancel our college fest and ban canteen credit. A mutual fear of consequences set in... and just like that, **negotiations began.**

It wasn’t exactly the Treaty of Versailles, but given the heat, dust, and bruised egos involved, it was the closest our college had ever come to diplomatic history. And thus, peace talks began—over water bottles, handshakes, and the occasional dirty look.

Word on the street was that **Computer Science boys** were regularly showing up at the **Environmental Science department**, not to admire flora and fauna, but to *trouble the fauna that wore kajal*

*and walked in groups of three.* Basically, the gossip mill claimed we were going there just to bother the girls.

Naturally, this caused a bit of a stir.

But then came the *ultimate comeback* from our side: “If we’re going there for sightseeing... then **what about you people visiting our department to stare at our hot Rose?**”

Ah yes—**Rose**, the undisputed crush of half the campus and a proud member of our Computer Science department. She could just walk down a corridor and unintentionally cause boys to forget their passwords, PINs, and sometimes, even their ancestors names.

So the argument was simple: **You ogle at Rose, we admire your shrubs—it’s even.**

A few wise guys even proposed drafting an interdepartmental treaty:

*“No more cross-departmental staring unless it’s mutual and peaceful.”*

And when the Environmental Science folks tried to play the victim card, we fired back: “Well, if we’re not allowed us to enter your department, then maybe you shouldn’t be wandering around ours either. Let’s install entry gates with biometric scans. Only cactus and Java programmers allowed! Not you chlorophylls!” It became a full-blown *cold war of glances*.

The debate had nothing to do with academics by this point. It was all about who started it, who stared first, and who had the better excuse for trespassing. Because in college, justice isn’t blind—it **just has really sharp eyesight when it comes to crushes.**

Given how wild things had gotten—and considering **Rose’s legendary campus fame**—the compromise we reached turned out to be a massive win for us. Actually, forget “compromise.” It was more like a **strategic retreat disguised as maturity.**

Once the dust settled, most of the boys from various departments—Arts, E.Science even those random guys from Sociology who no one ever saw in college—**collectively decided to blame the Environmental Science girl** for everything. The logic?

*“Why did she have to call her brother? Everything was chill before that!”*

But let’s be honest—that outrage had very little to do with justice and a lot more to do with **Rose**.

We call her **‘Menka’**. Like the celestial enchantress from mythology, her mere presence could shatter focus, derail careers, and shake the vows of celibacy boys had never really taken in the first place.

So when talks of interdepartmental bans came up, every red-blooded boy in college paused and thought:

*“Wait, wait, wait... if they’ll stop coming here... maybe we can’t go there, and that means—NO ROSE?”*

Absolutely not.

Unacceptable.

National crisis.

And just like that, all grudges were erased, tempers cooled, and every department agreed that peace was the best policy—as long as the **Rose route remained open**.

And the cherry on top?

The Environmental Science girl and her *arts-department-rage-machine* of a brother were both **made to apologize to Bhagat**—yes, *Bhagat*, the same guy who probably didn’t remember half the fight thanks to his “herbal meditation” earlier in the day. Still, he accepted the apology with the wisdom and grace of a chilled-out sage. But wait—it gets better.

Just as the apology was being delivered, just as tempers were finally cooling and the last bruised egos were being bandaged...

**Rose appeared.** Like a scene straight out of a campus myth, she strolled in, casually, elegantly, entirely unaware that a full-blown **college-scale Mahabharata** had just wrapped up around her.

Heads turned. Conversations froze mid-sentence. One Arts boy dropped his specs.

A guy from Chemistry whispered, “Is she real or a hallucination from lab fumes?”

And there she was—calm, radiant, *completely oblivious* to the battlefield her presence had unknowingly pacified. Funny how in the original *Mahabharata*, a woman’s presence started the war... and here, **a woman’s presence ended it—without a mass hospital tour.**

If Bhagat had been slightly more sober, he might’ve whispered something poetic like,

**“Where logic fails, and fists fly, only Rose can bring peace.”**

Either way, history was made.

Victory was ours.

And Rose?

Still blissfully unaware she had just become the **Brahmastra of our great academic war**, minus the melodrama, plus a lot more swag.

**Next Day:**

Just when we thought everything had gone back to normal—the chaos of yesterday tucked away like an unfinished assignment—**Bhagat pulled a Bhagat’s idea.** Without a word, the man **sprang up from his chair** like he’d sat on a live wire. The classroom, which had been settling into its usual morning mood—murmurs, yawns, and the soothing rustle of notebooks—was suddenly on high alert. Papers flew. Chairs creaked. Heads turned.

Bhagat, wide-eyed and twitchy, dropped to the floor like a spy on a secret mission. He crouched under his desk, **frantically rummaging through the underworld of discarded wrappers, old pens, and a gold flake**, his face scrunched in panic, as if he'd just realized he'd misplaced the meaning of life.

Naturally, we all stopped pretending to study.

"Arrey Bhagat, what are you doing?"

"Did you lose your mind or your weed?"

"Or is this another Mahabharata sequel?"

Bhagat didn't answer immediately. His hands were flailing under the desk like he was trying to unearth buried treasure, or maybe wrestle a cockroach. We leaned in, half-concerned, half-trying-not-to-laugh.

The classroom had gone from sleepy to suspenseful in thirty seconds flat. Even the teacher paused mid-roll call, confused whether to intervene or grab popcorn.

It was especially bizarre because **Bhagat was usually the calm one**, the human embodiment of a chill playlist.

But today? His legs were shaking, his fingers were drumming like a nervous tabla player, and his eyes—oh, his eyes—were scanning the classroom like he was trying to spot a hidden enemy... or maybe the ghost of his dreams.

The rest of us sat frozen, watching the man unravel like a cracked beer bottle.

Something was clearly off. And when Bhagat finally surfaced from under the desk with a dramatically loud sigh and still no explanation, we knew one thing for sure: **This day was not going to be normal.**

At first, Bhagat waved us off with a dramatic sigh and the gravitas of a man delivering bad news to a nation.



**“I’ve lost something,” he declared, peering beneath the desk like it was a crime scene. “*Something important.*”**

Naturally, we assumed it was something serious. Maybe a love letter. Maybe his stash. Maybe—God forbid—his mother’s gold chain.

We gave him space. We offered moral support. We even checked under our own desks, just in case “important thing” had legs and wandered off.

But as **seconds turned into minutes**, and Bhagat continued his archaeological dig under his bench like he was searching for a lost civilization, our patience wore thinner than the hostel chapatis.

“Enough, Bhagat!” one of us finally snapped. “Just tell us! What *exactly* are you looking for? Did you drop a kidney or what?”

Cornered and visibly rattled, Bhagat slowly straightened up. His face was pale, his shirt was dusty, and his voice... oh, that voice was the stuff of suspense movies.

“I—I wasn’t lying,” he stammered, eyes darting like he was being watched by invisible CCTV cameras. “Something *really bad* happened... and that’s why I’m looking for it.”

Now we were fully hooked. We went silent. Even the teacher paused mid-rant about incomplete assignments.

Bhagat looked around nervously and said, with all the seriousness of a man confessing to losing the nuclear launch codes: “मेरी छोटी लाल डायरी खो गई है” (“My little red diary is missing.”)

A pause. Dead silence. Then, as realization set in, chairs squeaked and jaws dropped.

*The Red Diary.*

**Bhagat’s legendary “codebook of secrets,”** filled with mysterious scribbles, possible poetry, suspicious diagrams, and—if rumours were true—names of every girl he’d ever fallen in love

with, including their zodiac signs and approximate attendance percentage.

And now? It was **missing**.

We didn't know whether to panic, laugh, or start bidding on it. But one thing was clear: Bhagat wasn't looking for just any lost item. He was on a mission to recover a **classified, emotionally explosive manuscript** that—if found—could ruin lives, shake reputations, and potentially start Mahabharata: Chapter Two.

No wonder the man was crawling under desks like a deranged Gollum.

He wasn't crazy. He was terrified.

Just as Bhagat was about to launch into another round of cryptic rambling, **Kailash—never one to miss a punchline—blurted out: “Abe saale, you're not looking for a diary... you're looking for ‘something suspicious’ under the desk, aren't you?”**

Suddenly, the room went silent again.

Bhagat froze. His eyes widened like a villain caught monologuing too early in a movie. Cornered and dramatically breathless, Bhagat gave in.

He leaned in, lowered his voice whispering mode, like he was narrating a spy thriller, and dropped the kind of revelation that makes you question your life choices and your friend group.

**“Yes,” he whispered. “I was going to teach *that botany girl* a lesson... for everything she did yesterday.”**

We leaned in too, partly intrigued, partly concerned.

**And then came the plot twist.**

Bhagat, it turns out, had contacted a **local snake charmer**—yes, an actual one, with a turban, flute, and probably zero paperwork—and had **rented a live snake** as part of an elaborate revenge plan.

**A snake. A real one. For revenge. In a college.**

I could feel my heart pounding like a broken drum, equal parts **terror** and **“What the hell is happening!?”** The air around us felt heavier. My stomach tied itself into a sailor’s knot. Somewhere in the back of the class, someone whispered, ‘ये तो ‘Sholay’ का गब्बर निकला, भाई!’ (“He turned out to be Sholay’s Gabbar, bro.”)

The plan? Simple.

Smuggle the snake in to the garden during their practical class. Let panic erupt. Then emerge from the shadows with a philosophical one-liner about karma.

Was it genius? No.

Was it illegal? Absolutely.

Was it the most Bhagat thing Bhagat had ever done? Without a doubt.

Suddenly, this wasn't a college conflict anymore.

It had transformed into **Naagin Season: Campus Edition**. And now, we weren't just classmates. We were **unwilling co-stars in a wildlife crime documentary**.

Bhagat, now fully in *confession mode*, leaned back and spoke like he was narrating a ghost story by candlelight.

“So, listen...” he began, with the casual tone of someone talking about losing a pencil, not a potentially venomous reptile.

“I had kept the snake... in a box. A nice, tight, air-holed box. Very secure. Snake-proof, you know?”

We nodded hesitantly—because sure, Bhagat was suddenly an expert in snake logistics.

“But,” he continued, his voice dropping to a dramatic whisper, “when I went to check it later...”

**He paused.**

We held our breath.

**“...the snake was gone.”**

*GONE?!*

There was a moment of collective silence, the kind where you could hear your soul say, *“Ab to gaya re tu.”* (*judgement day*)

We all processed that last sentence at different speeds.

Some blinked. Some gasped. One guy straight-up stood up and checked his shoes. And then—like an invisible switch had flipped—we **sprang out of our chairs like contestants on KBC hitting the buzzer.**

*“SNAKE IS LOOSE!”* someone shouted.

“Under the bench, bro! UNDER THE BENCH!” another yelled, now practically doing parkour over the furniture. The classroom turned into a **live-action wildlife documentary**, but with zero professional help and a lot of screaming. Panic spread like wildfire. Faces turned pale, eyes darted around, and everyone suddenly became a snake detection expert. Even the guy who hadn’t moved during roll call in months was now up on his chair doing a full-body scan. The fear was **real**. Because somewhere in that classroom, slithering silently... was a missing cobra with unresolved emotional baggage, thanks to Bhagat.

It was no longer about classes or crushes or college drama. It was now about survival. And the unsettling truth that **Bhagat had brought a snake to class**—and then *lost it*.

Amidst the shrieks, students balancing on desks, and one guy trying to climb a window like Spider-Man with a backache, **Bhagat—our very own modern-day Baba ‘Bengali Baba’—stood up with the calm of a yoga instructor.**

“Relax, yaar!” he said, as if someone had just spilled tea, not *unleashed a literal snake into a classroom.*

He raised both hands, motioning for calm like some sort of *sneaky Saint Kabir*.

“Guys, listen to me—the snake is harmless.”

“*HARMLESS?*” someone screeched from the back while holding a geometry box like a shield.

“**It has SCALES, Bhagat!** It moves without legs! What part of that says ‘let’s chill?’”

But Bhagat stood his ground, cool as ever.

“I spoke to the snake charmer personally,” he began, in a tone that suggested this was a totally normal sentence to say in an academic setting. “He’s removed the fangs. Venom’s been drained. It’s basically... symbolic.”

Symbolic?!

Bro, this wasn’t a *rakhi*! It was a **reptile**!

Bhagat continued, unfazed, “Look, I get it—it’s not a cat. It won’t purr and roll over. But trust me, it’s safe.”

Oh yes, *technically safe*—like a deactivated bomb someone forgot to label properly.

Still, his words did offer a tiny bit of comfort. We slowly started climbing down from benches, though most of us still kept our bags clutched like riot shields. The idea that it couldn’t bite us *did* help... a little.

But the underlying truth remained: **Snake or no snake, fangs or no fangs—you don’t chill around something that hisses when it’s annoyed.**

Because as Bhagat himself said, “**It may not be dangerous, but bhai... it’s still a snake. Not a staffroom cat.**”

Even though Bhagat had given us his expert review on “Why This Snake Won’t Kill You (Probably),” the atmosphere in the

classroom was still thick with tension—and not the exam-type tension, the venomous, slithery kind.

We began our **snake hunt** like a bunch of terrified treasure hunters, crawling on all fours, peeking under desks, behind cupboards, inside backpacks—basically conducting the most disorganized CSI operation in college history.

Each creak of a chair made someone flinch. Each rustle of paper was treated like a hiss.

Even a pencil rolling off a desk triggered a full-blown panic reaction in three people.

That's when it happened.

**The door creaked open.**

Enter: *Our teacher.*

White shirt. Chalk in hand.

Expression? Somewhere between “*Did I walk into the wrong class?*” and “*Should I call the police?*”

He looked around and saw the scene:

- Half the class **on the floor like a failed yoga workshop.**
- Bags tossed aside.
- People whispering “Did it go under YOUR desk?”
- Bhagat still standing like a monk who summoned this mess but had no regrets.

With his eyebrows doing a slow upward climb, the teacher finally broke the silence with a single, bewildered sentence: “**What are you all looking for?**”

Time. Froze.

No one spoke. No one moved. It was like being caught red-handed by your parents... but instead of chewing gum, it was **a missing snake.**

We exchanged glances, trying to figure out who'd be brave (or foolish) enough to answer.

Someone coughed. Someone giggled. Bhagat scratched his head like he was about to say *"Sir, it's part of a zoology demo..."*

But no words came out. Just one silent, unified thought in every student's head: **"How the hell do you explain *this*?"**

Still frozen in place like a group of kids caught raiding the fridge at midnight, we knew we had to say *something*. The teacher was still staring at us, clearly trying to figure out whether to scold us or call for backup.

So, mustering all our collective courage and absolutely none of our honesty, we offered him the most polished, vague, and suspicious explanation of the decade.

"Sir," one of us began, clearing his throat, **"We've... uh... lost something. Something *very important*."**

The teacher blinked. "What kind of important?"

Another guy jumped in, dramatically placing a hand on his chest like he was describing a missing national treasure.

**"Sir, it's not just important in a material sense... it has *emotional value* too."**

Yes, *emotional value*.

Bhagat nodded solemnly in the background, playing the role of the grieving owner of the "emotionally valuable item," while the rest of us continued our floor-level detective work.

He crossed his arms.

"Is this about a phone?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Wallet?"

"No, sir."

“Then *what?*”

Silence.

We all looked at each other again. No one wanted to say “*snake*” out loud. Because really, how do you explain to a man with a master’s degree that you’ve accidentally released a live reptile into his 10:00 a.m. lecture?

So we just gave him the most intense, puppy-eyed stare of our lives and said: “**Sir... please trust us. We *really* need to find it.**”

And he sighed.

Rubbed his temples.

And, to our utter disbelief, **started helping us look.**

Bless that man. May he never know what he was actually looking for.

The teacher squinted at us, still suspicious, arms folded like a judge waiting for a very bad lawyer to finish his speech.

“Did someone accidentally drop money or something?” he asked, with that classic “*don’t try to fool me*” tone.

And just like that, we found our golden excuse.

“**Yes, sir!**” we chorused, seizing the opportunity like true professionals. “Actually, Bhagat lost his mother’s gold chain. We can’t find it anywhere!”

Bhagat, who had just been anxiously scanning under a bookshelf for signs of slithering, perked up and immediately got into character.

“Sir, it was my .....,” he added with just the right touch of emotional pain, “*my lifeline!*”

Gold chain?” the teacher repeated, eyebrows raised.

We nodded solemnly.

In our heads: *It’s not a lie if it saves lives.*



Fuelled by the “missing gold chain” narrative, we launched into **Phase 2 of Operation: Snake Hunt**, now cleverly disguised as **Operation: gold chain Recovery**.

Desks were moved. Benches were tilted. One guy even used a stick like a metal detector. Behind all this financial drama, of course, the **real motive slithered silently on: to find the missing snake** before it found us. And so we carried on, eyes peeled, adrenaline high, acting like gold chain was at stake—while also praying that no one said, “Hey... why is the gold chain hissing?”

And just when we thought the drama had peaked at “missing chain,” the universe decided to say: **“Beta, abhi picture baaki hai.”**(**“बेटा, अभी फिल्म बाकी है।”**)(suprise)

Out of nowhere, a **blood-curdling scream** tore through the classroom from the girls' side—so loud and shrill it could've triggered a fire drill.

**“SNAKE! SNAKE! MADHURIMA KO KAAT LIYA!”**

Time stopped. Jaws dropped.

Bhagat nearly fainted next to the window.

We whipped around just in time to see **Madhurima dramatically collapse to the ground**, like a Bollywood heroine in her final scene. Her arms flopped. Her head lolled. Her body went full slow-motion.

Rose, standing right next to her, looked like she had seen *Naagin live in 3D*. Completely frozen. Mouth open. Eyes wide. Hands trembling like she was holding an invisible weight.

The rest of the girls had formed a cluster at the back of the room, huddled together like meerkats in a thunderstorm, all whispering variations of,

**“This is why I hate reptiles.”**

**“Is Bhagat even human?”**

Meanwhile, we—The Brotherhood of the Lost Snake—charged forward in panic, part-rescue team, part-blame management committee.

There lay **Madhu**, motionless, pale, surrounded by dropped books, scattered pens, and **a whole classroom paralyzed with fear**.

Someone whispered, “Bro... we’re so expelled.” Because this wasn’t just chaos anymore. This was “*snake-bite, girl-unconscious, teacher-still-clueless, Bhagat-on-the-verge-of-tears*” level chaos.

And as the seconds ticked by like hours, one thing was clear: **This was no longer a prank. This had just become a cold blooded crime.**

Kailash, ever the self-declared medical expert despite having failed Biology in school twice, crouched next to Madhurima and dramatically whispered, **"Bhai... I think the poor girl's been bitten. She's... dead."**

I nearly choked. “*What?! Dead?!*”

I shook my head so hard I gave myself whiplash.

“Are you mad? She’s just fainted, yaar! She probably saw the snake and panicked. Don’t start writing obituaries already!”

But Kailash wasn’t done with his *Breaking News* routine.

**“Forget the snake!”** he insisted. “*First put ear on her chest and check if she’s breathing or not!*”

I looked at him like he’d grown two heads.

**“Excuse me?!”**

I said, full desi indignation activated. **“You absolute pervert! This is not the time to measure Madhu’s breast movements!”**

Honestly, I was fuming. The girl was unconscious, a snake was loose, and Kailash was out here acting like a censored movie doctor. The air was thick with tension—me glaring at Kailash, Kailash defending his “CPR strategy,” Rose still frozen like a statue beside

Madhu, and the rest of us mentally rehearsing what we'd say to the principal when this whole snake hunting hit the audience. And then, **right on cue**, Manikant's voice sliced through the chaos like a flying chalk from an angry teacher:

**“LOOK! THERE! THERE’S THE SNAKE!”**

Everyone turned. He was right. Forget gold chain. Forget the CPR confusion. Now it was **Snake vs. Students: Round Two**.

As we cautiously leaned in to check on **Rose**—who, by the way, still looked like she was posing like a stone statue—our eyes suddenly caught a glint of something shiny black... something suspicious... something **wiggling**.

We squinted. We leaned closer. Someone gasped. Someone *crossed themselves*. And then it hit us—**Bhagat’s legendary missing snake** had finally been found...

**Tucked neatly between Rose’s bra.**

Yes.

**There.**

**Inside her bra. Piking out little head.**

Like it had booked a suite at a 5-star hotel and checked in for a weekend getaway.

There was a full five seconds of stunned silence where no one breathed, spoke, or blinked.

We just stared. Bhagat's mouth fell open so wide it could've caught rain.

Kailash looked like he was about to file a **Right to Information** request to understand *how* this happened.

**“Bhai... ye toh National Geographic bhi nahi dikhata,”** someone whispered.

We were baffled—not just by the **where**, but the **how**.

How had the snake pulled off such an *elite-level infiltration*?

Had it slithered in like a secret agent?

Was it trained? Was it... *sexually motivated*?

And the biggest mystery of all—**how did Rose not feel it?**

Maybe she thought it was a new push-up feature.

Maybe it got in during all the screaming and snake-spotting.

Maybe it just liked warm places and dramatic tension.

We didn't know whether to be **terrified, confused**, or just plain impressed by the snake's commitment to staying undetected.

But one thing was clear—this snake didn't just steal Bhagat's gold chain worth reputation.

It had now **claimed legendary status** by casually turning Rose into the *accidental final hiding spot* in the most bizarre campus tale of our lives.

And Bhagat?

He just folded his hands in prayer and whispered, “बस भगवान... इसे ज़िंदा वापस ले आना। साँप को नहीं — साँप तो अब जा चुका है।” (“Oh God... just bring her back alive. Not the snake — the snake's already gone.”)

Let's be honest—**finding a live snake tucked inside someone's undergarments** between censored things isn't just shocking...**It's straight-up trauma with a side of therapy bills.**

So when the serpent made its surprise cameo **from inside Rose's bra**, the collective oxygen in the room vanished.

Jaws dropped. Eyes popped.

And **Madhu?**

Well, she simply couldn't compute that level of *wild*. One look at that slithery surprise and **boom—she fainted like a character**

**in a 90s TV serial.** No slow-motion. No warning. Just *instant shutdown*. Like someone had pressed Ctrl+Alt+Delete on her brain.

“ये तो सच में हो गया...” (“This actually happened...”) someone whispered, clutching their chest.

A few girls screamed, a few boys widened their pupil, and one confused soul asked, **“Was the snake... chilling in there the whole time?”**

Yes, dear friend.

This wasn't just a wildlife encounter.

This was **National Geographic meets serial drama**, and Madhu had just been served **the unfiltered, 18+, uncensored version.**

So really, her dramatic collapse was **completely justified**. Because if *you* saw a snake emerge from friend's bra like it had paid rent there, you'd probably faint too. Or scream. Or swear off all undergarments forever.

As for the rest of us?

We were just standing there, eyes wide, mouths open, questioning reality...

...while Bhagat, the accidental snake dad, whispered under his breath:

**“Bhai... I only wanted mild revenge. Now we need medical attention, legal aid, and possibly an exorcist.”**

To everyone's utter shock—including the snake's, probably—the girl in question, **Rose**, wasn't unconscious, wasn't fainting, and most surprisingly, **wasn't even screaming.**

Nope.

She was just... **standing there.** Eyes half closed, lips trembling, **shaking like a leaf during cyclone season**, but

somehow still vertical—like her body said “panic!” but her brain forgot to hit the scream button.

And just as chaos threatened to go full-on *Animal Planet meets campus scandal*, **Bhagat jumped into action** like a seasoned wildlife rescuer who also happened to be the prime suspect.

**“Calm down, everyone! Chill! Chill! Chill!”** he said, hands raised, like Moses parting the Red Sea—or in this case, parting panicked students from Rose’s condition and her reptilian accessory.

Then, in his best “I swear this makes sense” tone, Bhagat launched into his explanation:

“Guys, look—it’s fine. Seriously! The snake’s totally harmless. Non-venomous. No fangs. It came from a professional snake charmer. He took all the safety steps. It can’t hurt anyone.”

There was a pause.

Someone muttered, **“It’s still a freaking snake, Bhagat. Not a neckless.”**

But Bhagat, ever the confident chaos generator, continued:

“Even if it bites—which it won’t, I promise—it’s like being poked with a safety pin. Nothing will happen. No venom. No hospital. No obituary.”

Some students began to breathe again. A few even lowered their “defence sticks”. But the tension in the air still hung like leftover exam anxiety. Meanwhile, Rose—who now had the unofficial title of **“Most Composed Human in a Wildlife Emergency”**—finally let out a soft, shaky breath.

And the snake?

Still coiled like it owned the place.

**Living rent-free in college history.**

And just when we thought the worst was over—snake found, Bhagat’s public safety speech delivered, and Rose somehow still on her feet—the **real question** slithered into the room:

**“Now who’s going to remove it?”**

Yes.

**THE snake. (Not the bra)**

**FROM her undergarments.**

**Live. On campus. In front of 40 pupils.**

Instant silence.

Because this wasn’t just a wildlife problem anymore.

**This was a social boundaries, HR policy, and moral compass type of problem.**

No one wanted to say it, but we were all thinking the same thing: **“One wrong move and I’m either expelled, arrested, or trending on campus groups.”**

Rose stood frozen, doing her best not to move a single muscle, because let’s face it—**no one trains you for this scenario in self-defence class.**

Kailash looked ready to do. Manikant tried to look away but kept peeking like it was a censored movie he couldn’t stop watching. Even Bhagat, our resident snake expert, suddenly found the ceiling **very** interesting. The room filled with awkward glances, anxious throat-clearing, and silent prayers.

Finally, someone whispered, **“Should we... call the snake charmer?”**

Another guy muttered, **“Bro, at this point, just call the wild life team.”**

Because the question was simple, yet absolutely unanswerable: **How do you *politely* rescue a snake... from someone’s bra... in**

**front of an audience... without losing all dignity, reputation, or your scholarship?**

It was the most delicate operation in college history. **Mission: Sensitive.**

Just when the room was drowning in tension, awkward glances, and silent *“Bhai tu ja na”* gestures, **Prawal** stepped forward—like a hero from a small-budget wildlife documentary meets Bollywood masala flick.

His eyes sparkled with destiny. His chest puffed with purpose. His brain? Probably screaming *“What are you doing, bro?!”*

But his mouth said: **“I’ll do it.”**

Everyone froze. Even the snake might’ve paused mid-snooze.(abe saale)

Pawan raised his hand and declared, **“I can handle this. Trust me. Back in my village, snake-catching was my childhood hobby.”**

Now, whether this was true or just bravado fuelled by adrenaline and the presence of Rose, nobody dared question him. He continued with full filmy flair: **“I’ve spent hours studying snakes—watching them slither, sleep, eat... even sulk. I know their mood swings. I know their *aesthetics*. And more importantly—”**

*he paused for dramatic effect*, **“—I know how to safely remove them from tricky places.”**

Kailash blinked. **“Define tricky.”**

But Pawan wasn’t fazed. He was in full snake-whisperer mode now. We thought he might be a Slytherin, like in *Harry Potter*, and could start hissing at the snake in gibberish. His voice carried the gravity of a man who was either about to become a campus legend... or the subject of a very uncomfortable disciplinary hearing.



**“Trust me,”** he said, with the confidence of someone who’d just been gifted divine permission.

**“This is my moment. And I was born ready.”**

The crowd parted like the Red Sea.

And Pawan?

He stepped forward toward Rose, the snake, and fate itself...

...while Bhagat muttered behind him, **“Just don’t pull out her bra, focus on snake.”**

After the whole *“snake in the bra”* saga had reached its peak and Prawal was standing by like a contestant on *India’s don’t Got (Very Specific) Talent*, we all huddled around **Rose**, trying our best to calm her down.

But let’s be real—**how do you comfort someone who’s literally got a snake napping in her undergarments?**

We tried everything—logic, science, emotional.

“Rose, listen... it’s non-venomous, totally harmless!”

“It doesn’t even have teeth, okay? It can’t bite!”

“Worst case, it tickles you a little. That’s it!”

But Rose? Nope.

She was locked in full **stone age mode**.

We sighed. Again.

Rose. You won’t die.”

“It’s basically a noodle with a tongue now.”

“Bhagat said the venom’s gone. And for once, he might be right.”

“We’ll get it out quickly. Safely. (With dignity. Hopefully.)”

Pawan, meanwhile, stood a few feet away doing deep breathing exercises like a warrior about to enter battle. Someone offered him gloves. Someone else suggested a blindfold—“for modesty.”

He refused both. And in that moment, with **one girl frozen in terror** and **one boy ready to perform history’s weirdest rescue mission**, the entire classroom held its collective breath.

Because extracting a snake is one thing. **Extracting it from a bra... in front of wolves**, *that’s* pressure.

We softly whispered to Rose, like we were defusing a bomb: **“Just don’t open your eyes, stay absolutely still. We’ve got this.”**

She nodded—barely—and squeezed her eyes shut, praying to every god, goddess.

Then came **Prawal’s moment of glory**. With all the intensity of a trained commando, **he reached in**—and in one smooth, almost magical move, **gripped the snake right by its head** and gently pulled it out of its hideout.

And then... the whole room gasped.

**It wasn’t just any snake.**

It was a sleek, shiny **black cobra**, nearly **two feet long**, slithering in slow motion like it knew it was the star of the show.

Before we could even scream **“What the actual—”, Rose fainted.**

Boom. Out cold.

No more bravery. No more blinking.

She simply **collapsed like a government website on exam results day.**

But wait—**Prawal didn’t flinch.**

Like a true multitasking superhero, he casually caught her in his **left arm**, while still holding the cobra steady in his **right hand**—as if this was something he did every Sunday.

**The entire classroom stood frozen, then slowly broke into applause and smiles.**

There he was: Prawal, the fearless snake charmer and accidental Prince Charming, **holding a venomous reptile in one hand and the Greek goddess in the other.**

It was cinematic. It was heroic. And for Prawal?

**It was the fulfilment of a lifelong dream: to handle danger, win a girl, and be cheered like a rockstar—all in one single, shirt-slightly-unbuttoned moment.**

Somewhere in the background, Bhagat whispered, **“Yeh banda toh full Rajinikanth nikla.”**

The entire crowd **burst into applause.**

**“Wah, Pawan bhai!”**

**“What a man!”**

**“Snake in the bra? Bas Prawal sambhalega!”**

The praises flowed like mango juice in summer. Even the teachers looked like they were reconsidering their career choices.

To the world, **Prawal had become a legend.** A modern-day **Shaktimaan with a zoology side hustle**, applauded for his bravery, precision, and nerves of absolute steel.

But those of us who actually *knew* Prawal?

We exchanged knowing smirks.

Because while the entire crowd saw a **campus hero who battled a snake**, we knew the truth:

**Prawal’s focus wasn’t on the cobra.**

It wasn’t on the applause.

It wasn't even on the fainted damsel in his arms.

No, dear reader. **His brain was stuck in a completely different dimension.**

Inside his head, there was only one thought looping on repeat: “भाई... मैं रोज़ को हाथों में लेकर खड़ा हूँ... हाथों में!” (“Bro... I’m standing here holding Rose... in my arms!”)

Snake? Whatever.

Danger? Who cares.

Applause? Cool, but *have you seen this moment?!*

His inner monologue had nothing to do with reptiles or bravery. It was full **Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge background score**, with wind blowing and violins playing as he imagined this very scene on a movie poster titled: **“A SNAKE IN THE BRA.”**

And as Rose slowly regained consciousness and blinked up at him,

Prawal smiled politely...(while mentally booking a wedding hall in his hometown).

The snake had finally been wrangled—a **two-foot-long, bra-stowaway cobra**, now tamed and dangling from Pawan’s hand like an awkward prize in a very questionable carnival game.

But just as we were about to high-five and declare campus peace restored, **our professor stepped in**, looking every bit like a man who had seen enough chaos for one semester.

In his calm, no-nonsense tone—the kind that usually followed “*Everyone bring your parents tomorrow*”—he turned to Bhagat and said: **“Put the snake back in the basket. Gently. And take it outside. Immediately.”**

Bhagat nodded like an obedient zookeeper at a temple fair. He moved cautiously, handling the snake like it was a very delicate, very slippery USB cable from the underworld.

But before he could even cross the classroom threshold, **the cavalry arrived.**

One by one, **Heads of Departments** came marching in—**Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics... even Physical Education,** who clearly just came for the drama. They all looked like detectives in a murder mystery, scanning the room, spotting the snake, spotting Bhagat, spotting Rose who was still recovering like a Disney princess after trauma.

The HOD of Zoology muttered, **“Is this cobra part of a lab experiment?”**

“Definitely not!” our professor snapped. “It was in a bra, not a beaker.”

Amid the rising buzz, the top brass collectively declared: **“First, let the snake go. Alive. Far away. Then we’ll talk about what to do with this Bhagat fellow.”**

Bhagat, now demoted from *snake whisperer* to *campus suspect #1*, looked like he wanted to vanish deep into the ground.

The air was thick with tension—but the message was clear: **“Settle Snake first. Suspension later.”** It was probably the first time in college history that the wellbeing of a reptile took priority over disciplinary action.

And then came the **scolding of the century.**

Every head of department, professor, and possibly even the college gardener gathered to rain down verbal fire on us. If anger had a ringtone, it was playing on full volume in that room.

One of them pointed at Bhagat and bellowed, **“You boys aren’t students—you’re jungle animals! WILD BEASTS!”**

(Which was ironic, because Bhagat had literally just released wildlife back into the wild.)

Another professor chimed in with dramatic flair, **“Civilized society has no place for people like you! You belong in jail. Maybe even a zoo, preferably near the snake section.”**

It was less of a staff meeting and more of a courtroom drama, where every sentence began with *“Shame on you!”* and ended with *“How DARE you bring a cobra into a college campus?!”*

We stood there silently, heads bowed, trying very hard not to laugh, cry, or faint.

**“You’ve made a mockery of the educational system!”** one shouted, thumping the attendance register like a judge slamming his gavel. **“You could’ve killed someone! You turned a classroom into a circus!”**

Meanwhile, Bhagat looked like he was mentally drafting his autobiography: **“From Scholar to Snake Smuggler: The Untold Story.”**

The scolding went on for what felt like hours. At one point, the HOD of English dramatically declared, **“You have ruined the sanctity of learning!”**—like we’d spilled poison ivy on Shakespeare’s grave.

But the best line?

**“Boys like you shouldn’t be given education. You should be given handcuffs!”**

We all nodded solemnly. Not because we agreed. But because when the whole staff room is collectively threatening jail time, even *yes sir* feels like a defence mechanism.

And deep down, we knew one thing for sure: **That snake may have left the building, but the consequences? Oh, they were just getting warmed up.**

Thanks to Bhagat and his brilliant idea of turning **“National Snake Awareness Week”** into a **live-action horror-comedy**, we found ourselves teetering on the **edge of criminal history**. Not just

campus-level mischief—oh no—we had casually moonwalked into *CRPC meets Discovery Channel* territory.

And as our professor continued his relentless scolding, with words like **“disgrace,” “irresponsible,”** and **“donkey brained hooligans,”** something strange started happening...

We felt it. Not guilt. Not shame.

**Laughter.**

Yes, *pure, bubbling, forbidden laughter.* (inner side)

The more serious he became—his forehead veins popping like bad cable wiring—the more we wanted to roll on the floor, laughing like school kids who’d just farted during assembly.

Every line of fury he unleashed?

**Comedy gold.**

**“You boys have no future!”**

(We nodded solemnly, while mentally noting: “Maybe in wildlife rescue?”)

**“You’ve turned this college into a circus!”**

(True. All we needed was a juggler and popcorn.)

We tried everything—biting lips, digging nails into palms, imagining exam results—but every time we made eye contact, someone’s shoulders would start shaking, and it was game over.

We were stuck in the world’s toughest game of **“Try Not To Laugh: Snake Edition.”**

Bhagat, the ringleader of the madness, sat with the most angelic expression—as if he’d merely borrowed a pen, not released a reptile into someone’s bra.

The whole room was a pressure cooker of emotions—**guilt, thrill, and the very real danger of laughing out loud in the face of disciplinary death.**

And that's what made the moment unforgettable.

Because nothing bonds friends tighter than **dodging expulsion while desperately trying not to snort-laugh in front of five furious professors and a traumatized snake-handler.**

Ah yes. **College life.**

Where the lessons were never boring...

...especially when someone brought a snake to class.

After the Great Serpent Saga finally slithered to an end, the two fainted girls—**Madhu and Rose, our poor drama queens in distress**—were gently lifted like fragile porcelain dolls and taken to the **college sick room**, a place that usually only saw hangovers and fake headaches during surprise tests.

There, they were laid down with great care on those ancient iron beds covered in stiff, crinkly white sheets that smelled vaguely of Dettol and forgotten dreams.

Time slowed down. Every second ticked like a suspense movie countdown—except instead of defusing a bomb, we were waiting for eyelashes to flutter.

**Fifteen minutes later**, Madhu stirred. **Twenty minutes in**, Rose blinked like a Disney princess waking up from a dramatic coma.

But even after they regained consciousness, **the emotional earthquake still hadn't stopped**. For the next **thirty minutes**, they sat there looking like they'd personally survived '*Kaal Sarpa Dosh*'.

And then... came the **flood**.

Both girls burst into tears—**loud, echoing sobs**—as if they'd just found out their favourite daily soap had been cancelled.

Tears streamed down their cheeks **like water from a government tap with no washer—full pressure, zero control.**



The sobbing was so dramatic, even the nurse peeked in and whispered,

**“Did someone die or was it just a snake?”**

Meanwhile, outside the room, we waited in guilt-drenched silence—well, *mild guilt*, mostly overshadowed by the surrealness of the whole situation. Because honestly, how do you react when your classmate faints from a snake in a bra, and now it’s turned into a **weep-a-thon** that sounds like an award ceremony speech?

We didn’t know whether to offer tissues, apology letters, or just quietly rename the incident: **“Operation Cobra – The Campus Meltdown.”**

One thing was certain though: This story would be told for years...

...and Madhu’s sobs would echo in the corridors **like a cautionary tale about never trusting a boy named Bhagat**. After what felt like an emotional Kumbh Mela of crying, gasping, and dramatic sighing, **the storm finally began to settle**. The girls, who had cried enough to irrigate half the botanical garden, slowly ran out of tears—**not because the pain had vanished, but because their emotional fuel tank had finally hit ‘E’**.

And with that... came silence.

Not the awkward kind that follows a bad joke—**this was a soothing, peaceful quiet**, like the calm after a thunderstorm... or the silence right after the last spoon scrapes the bottom of a kulfi stick. Their bodies slumped into the sick room beds like half-deflated balloons, completely exhausted—**mentally, physically, and very much theatrically**.

The nurse tiptoed around like she was guarding recovering warriors. Meanwhile, outside, we held our breath, unsure if we should send chocolates. But inside that tiny, antiseptic-smelling room, something shifted. The chaos faded. The fear melted. What was left behind was... stillness.

A stillness that said: “Yes, a snake was in a bra. Yes, we fainted. But no, we’re not going to complain. At least not today.”

Out of nowhere, **Prawal spun around, eyes sparkling with possibility**, and declared to us in a voice louder than necessary: **“Guys, this is it. I think I should ask Rose out for a coffee. Right now.”**

Malik blinked. **She’d just fainted.**

There was still snake trauma in the air. The nurse was barely done checking pulses. And here was our man, treating the situation like the closing scene of a romantic film.

He continued, undeterred, hands on hips like a saviour fresh off a rescue mission: **“Think about it! She’s just faced a near-death experience(according to her). Her heart’s still racing. What better time for a soothing cup of coffee and a soothing presence—me?”**

We didn’t know whether to laugh, cheer, or remind him that snakes don’t count as icebreakers in most dating cultures.

**“She needs comfort,”** he said, adjusting his imaginary hero’s cape.

**“And coffee. Preferably with me.”**

It was classic Prawal logic: Snake trauma + caffeine = romance.

One of us whispered, **“Bro, she literally fainted into your arms five minutes ago.”**

He grinned, **“Exactly. Destiny’s way of leaning into my embrace.”**

Ah, the confidence of a man who just held a cobra in one hand and Rose in the other. **Who were we to stand in the way of love... or delusion?**

And so, while the rest of us processed the madness of the day, **Prawal was already dreaming of cappuccinos, eye contact, and possibly a second date at the zoo.**

Without wasting a second, I turned to Prawal with the energy of a cricket coach before the final over and said, **“Bhai, this is it! If not now, then when? This is your golden moment!”**

**The situation had drama, danger, and now—dating.**

One guy whispered, “Is he really going to do it?”

Another added, “If this works, I’m buying a snake tomorrow.”

Prawal stood tall, chest puffed, eyes locked on the sick room like a hero about to deliver his romantic monologue.

And I? I gave him a thumbs-up, the universal sign for: **“Go win her heart... or at least don’t faint her again.”**

It was chaos, it was comedy, it was oddly adorable. And as he took that brave first step toward possibly getting rejected in front of half the college, we all collectively grinned, because we knew:

**This wasn’t just about coffee.** This was about **college legend status.**

Rose, still a bit shaken but now fully in her senses, turned to Prawal with eyes full of gratitude and a voice as soft as butter.

**“Thank you,”** she said, her tone trembling like it was straight out of a dramatic soap opera.

**“You saved my life.”**

A hushed “awww” rippled through the boys standing nearby like we were watching a romantic climax unfold live. We stood there, speechless, as Rose gave him a smile that said more than a thousand thank-you.

And Pawan?

He just adjusted his collar and whispered: **“Another day, another fangless rescue.”**

We couldn’t hold it in any longer—we **burst into laughter like a shaken-up soda bottle finally uncapped.**

“Arrey Prawal,” one of us grinned, “you’ve got time to tame snakes and charm girls—but what about *us*, bhai? Ever thought of putting half that effort into being a good friend?”

The teasing came fast and light, like a stand-up comedy night at a hostel common room.

**“Next time, rescue *us* from the mess in the mess hall!”**

**“Or maybe save us from boring lectures—be a real hero!”**

“Yaar, kya karein,” he said with a dramatic sigh. “Snake-handling, heart-stealing... friendship managing—all in a day’s work.”

**“We missed you, idiot.”**

I nudged Pawan with a grin and said, “Go for it, man. This is your moment—ask her for coffee before someone else steals the show.”

But before the romantic music could start playing in his head, Sheetesh leaned in dramatically and said, **“But how will you even make coffee, Prawal? The snake already drank all the milk!”**

The entire group *exploded* with laughter like a classroom when the teacher leaves for two minutes.

**Kailash, never one to let a punchline go untouched, added fuel to the fire:**

“I’ve seen snakes like that back in my village. They wrap themselves around the cow’s leg and slurp the milk straight from the udder. We call them *Dhodiya* snakes. Seems like Bhagat didn’t bring a cobra—he brought one of those. And now the snake’s gone and milked poor Rose dry! Prawal bhai, there’s nothing left. No use going now.”

**Prawal’s face turned red—not from embarrassment, but fury.**

"Shame on you guys!" he snapped. "Can't you see she's an innocent girl who just survived a snake attack? And you're making jokes?!"

Raju raised his hands in mock surrender. "As you wish, sir-ji. We're just the warning bells. "If you still want to open the treasure chest after the treasure is gone, that's your choice."

Prawal took a deep breath, then grinned and said with pure hero energy: **"I don't care. I'll go anyway. Even if there's no milk left, I'll drink black coffee. But I'm going."** And with that, **he walked off like a man on a mission**—no milk, no fear, just hope and a head full of filmi dreams.

He adjusted his collar, fixed his hair with a quick swoop (as if Rose was watching from a secret CCTV), and began his slow-motion walk toward Rose. We, the loyal **middle benchers**, watched him like cricket fans watching the last over of a tight match.

**"Look at him go,"** I whispered.

**"Like a warrior walking into a battlefield quest for dairy."**

Just then, **Sheetesh started humming the *Mission Impossible* theme**, and everyone joined in, turning Prawal's journey into a full-blown background score.

Meanwhile, Rose was sitting on a bench, still a little pale, sipping water, surrounded by her friends like a VIP in recovery. As Prawal approached, her friends narrowed their eyes—like a panel of strict aunties at a rishta interview.

**"Rose,"** he said, putting on his softest, most respectful tone.

**"I was wondering... would you like to grab a cup of coffee? Just to, you know, unwind after this... reptile-related trauma?"**

Rose looked up slowly, blinking.

For a moment, everything was quiet. Even the squirrels on the nearby tree stopped moving.

Then...

She gave a faint smile.

**“Only if it’s black coffee,”** she said, raising one eyebrow.

From hiding behind a neem tree(Infront of sick room), **we nearly choked on laughter.** Kailash thumped my back and whispered, “Arrey bhai! Even she knows the snake emptied the dairy section!”

Prawal, still cool as ever, nodded with mock seriousness.  
**“Black coffee it is. Milk is overrated anyway.”**

Raju sighed dramatically and said,

**“Bas, bhaiyon... aaj se woh humara nahi raha. Prawal is officially in a committed relationship—with Café Latte.”**

## CHAPTER 9

# Shouldn't Have Squeezed

The first-year exams had landed like a surprise guest at a party—unwanted, unavoidable, and fully ready to ruin the vibe. The dreaded exam schedule was up on the notice board, staring at us like a death warrant written in fine print.

It was a turning point. A moment of truth. A time to finally do what none of us had done all year—study.

So, in an extraordinary display of unity (possibly inspired by fear), we took a collective oath to cut back on *timepass* and focus on our books. That meant fewer late-night chai sessions, no aimless roaming, and absolutely no campus politics marathons—at least until the last paper.

Mornings were still a bit chill. We'd recharge by doing very important things like sharpening pencils we didn't use or staring dramatically at the ceiling fan, contemplating Newton's laws. But evenings? Oh, evenings were sacred.

The moment the clock struck five, we'd all scramble back to our rooms like responsible citizens.

Step one upon arrival: wash hands and feet. Not for any spiritual awakening, but because someone once said 'it calms the mind,' and we were willing to try anything that didn't involve actual studying.

By 6 PM, we were locked in. Books open. Brows furrowed. Highlighters in hand. The transformation was complete. From loafers to learners. From "just five more minutes" to "don't talk to me, I'm in the zone."

Whether we understood what we were reading was another matter entirely—but oh boy, did we *look* serious.

Our study sessions didn't just go late into the night—they *lived* there. On most days (okay, nights), we'd keep going till three or four in the morning like caffeine-fuelled zombies with syllabus-induced insomnia.

To support this madness, we'd flipped our entire daily routine on its head. Dinner?

That happened at 11 P.M sharp, because apparently, nothing says "focused student" like eating parathas while your neighbour is brushing his teeth to sleep. In between, we survived on light snacks—read: whatever was leftover in someone's drawer and not yet claimed by ants.

And then came the most sacred tradition of all: the **sutta break**. For our smoker friends, it was non-negotiable. Every hour, on the hour, they'd vanish with the seriousness of people going to sign a peace treaty. The rest of us, the non-smokers (or the "passive philosophers" as we liked to call ourselves), would join them anyway—stepping out onto the veranda, pacing back and forth like busy in nothing, contemplating everything from exam questions to the meaning of life to whether we should've taken commerce instead.

Now, just because we took regular snack breaks and turned sutta time into soul purification on the veranda didn't mean we weren't serious about our studies. Oh no—we were *very* serious. Possibly for the first time in our academic lives.

We were on a mission. For one and a half glorious months, we lived like scholarly monks—minus the peace, the silence, and the robes. Our eyes were glued to textbooks, our brains overloaded with computing languages, facts, and frantic underlining. This was our self-declared "Great Academic Push."

We became a team. A dysfunctional, sleep-deprived, snack-obsessed team. We'd quiz each other, argue about who stole whose



notes, and somehow manage to explain the toughest topics using examples of our daily life.

That shared struggle—those all-nighters, those panic-driven whisper-chants of “we’ve still got time”—welded us together. We weren’t just classmates anymore. We were comrades in the trenches of academia, united by caffeine, confusion, and a common dream: to somehow pass... preferably with grace marks.

**Finally**, the big day arrived—the day we had to submit our exam forms.

Yes, the *form submission day*.

The day that, for reasons unknown to science, felt more intense than the actual exams. The air was suspicious, like something dramatic was about to happen—except instead of explosions or plot twists, it was just... paperwork.

My gang and I marched toward the college counter. Some of us were excited, some were nervous, and one of us (Jimmy, obviously) over confident for nothing. As we neared the counter, fate—or maybe just dumb luck—put me right at the front of the line. I stood there, chest puffed, like I’d just been promoted to Form Submission Commander.

Behind me, my friends were whispering nervously, tossing around existential questions like, “Did I bring two photos or just one?”

and “What if I filled the wrong group code? Am I now enrolled in Zoology?”

It was that special kind of chaos where no one knew what was happening, but we were *very* stressed about it.

Further back, the rest of the student crowd looked like they were waiting for a visa to Mars—silent, serious, and slightly sweaty. Each person was deep in thought, clutching their documents like they were holding sacred scrolls. You could actually *feel* the pressure

in the air—as if one wrong signature might detonate the whole system.

And yet, for all the drama, we knew one thing: once those forms were submitted, there was no turning back. It was official. The exams were coming, whether we were ready or not—and judging by our faces, the answer was definitely *not*.

At long last, the counter opened. A murmur rippled through the line like we were in the presence of a celebrity. I took a deep breath, stepped forward like a man about to submit his tax returns and his soul, and clutched my exam form like it was a winning lottery ticket.

This was it. The Big Moment.

I handed the form over with the grace of someone who had conquered life itself. Victory surged through me—I had made it. Done.

Complete.

I mentally high-fived my inner self and prepared for the sweet, sweet sigh of relief...

...when the ‘*absolutely not gentleman*’ behind the counter frowned.

Oh no. Not the *frown*.

Not the dreaded *college admin staff frown*—the look that has shattered more dreams than most breakups.

He pointed at the form like it had personally offended him.

“पिन कहाँ है?” (Where’s the pin?)

Pin?

**PIN!?**

My smile froze.

My brain stopped.

My heartbeat joined the queue to drop out.

There it was—*the great oversight*. The tiny, stupid metal pin that was supposed to hold the form and the photos together like a happy little paper sandwich... was missing.

I had done the hard part. Filled everything, stood in line, reached the front—and now my entire academic future was hanging on a ‘2 anna’ stationery item.

All that was left was panic. And me, standing there like an idiot, whispering internally: “Why, God? Why me? Not now, not when I was this close to greatness...”

The clerk looked at me like I’d just handed him a burning charcoal. With the calm authority of someone who’s denied dreams before breakfast, he said, “फॉर्म ले जाओ, पिन लगाओ, फिर लाओ।”

(Take the form back. Attach the pin. Then come back.)

No drama. No sympathy. Just pure, unshakable bureaucracy.

It wasn’t a suggestion—it was a life sentence in paperclip court.

I puffed up my chest, channeled every debate competition I had ever lost, and declared with righteous confidence, “Since *I* was the first one in line, it’s only fair that my form gets processed first. So kindly close the counter till I return with the pin. Nobody moves till I’m back!”

Mic. Drop. (Almost.)

The clerk blinked. The crowd *did not*.

Within seconds, the whole place turned into a live episode of *College Courtroom: Battle for the Paperclip*.

Some students nodded furiously in my support, murmuring, “हाँ हाँ, सही तो कह रहा है... पहले आया, पहले हक्क है।” (first come first serve)

Others scoffed, “अबे चल, ये कोई राशन की लाइन है क्या? फॉर्म तो पूरा होना चाहिए ना?”

“Oh, come on! Is this some ration line or what? The form should at least be complete, right?”

Suddenly, this wasn't just about a pin anymore—it was about *justice*.

About *principles*. About whether the first person in line deserved mercy... or mockery.

It was a full-blown democratic meltdown over a two-paise pin.

And while the arguments flew hotter than the volcano lava, one thing was clear: this wasn't ending anytime soon—and I still didn't have a pin.

I wasn't done.

Fuelled by a dangerous mix of stress, sleep deprivation, and revolutionary spirit, I raised my voice like a man standing on the edge of a protest stage and declared, “If we students are expected to bring our *own* pins from home, then what's the point of this college being open at all?! Shut it down!”

People blinked.

I continued, undeterred and dramatically gesturing toward the dusty ceiling fan for emphasis:

“This is supposed to be a prestigious institution. We pay ridiculous fees, and you're telling me you can't afford a pin? *A pin?!?*

What are you doing with our money—investing in mujra?”

By now, I had everyone's attention. Even the chaiwala paused mid-sip.

I turned back to the clerk, voice now in full courtroom-lawyer mode.

“If students must bring pins from home, then at least put a proper notice on the wall! Something like: ‘Dear students, BYOP—Bring Your Own Pin.’

Till then, I demand that *you* provide the pin and accept this form like the future of India depends on it. Which, technically, it does.”

A moment of silence followed. That counter ‘*absolutely not gentleman*’ stared at me, expression somewhere between confusion and amusement, probably wondering whether to call security or applaud.

What happened next... honestly, I’m still not sure I’ve fully recovered.

Just as I was finishing my dramatic courtroom-style rant about pins, dignity, and institutional failure, the clerk—without so much as blinking—took my form and casually *flung it outside* like it was a used tissue.

For a moment, I just stood there, stunned. I mean, it wasn’t even a neat toss. It was the kind of throw that said, “*You and your dreams mean nothing to me.*”

My pride took a direct hit—like someone had slapped me with a sandal made of apathy.

Before I could even decide whether to cry, complain, or lecture him about professionalism, Sheetesh—my ever-reliable, always-overreacting partner in crime—snapped.

Without warning, he leaned over the counter and grabbed the clerk by the collar like it was an action scene from a movie.

And just like that, chaos hit *Level: Hostel Boys*.

Within seconds, it was *go-time*. The crowd surged. Fists flew. The glass counter window—once a humble shield between red tape and rebellion—shattered under the might of 20-25 angry boys who had clearly been waiting for a reason to unleash their suppressed syllabus-related rage.

They jumped inside like soldiers storming enemy territory. That poor clerk, who’d just moments ago launched my form into

orbit, now found himself the centre of an *extremely interactive feedback session*.

As for me? I stood frozen, watching the madness unfold—ready to join in but held back by a tragic technicality: *there was literally no room left to punch him*. The space was too tight. The beating was fully subscribed.

So I simply watched, arms folded, silently offering moral support.

Things escalated faster than a tea kettle on high flame.

With the counter smashed, the clerk bruised, and more than 25 students high on adrenaline and righteous rage, the college administration finally realized, “*Hmm... maybe we should do something.*”

In classic slow-motion urgency, they called in the campus security. You know, those sleepy guards with mismatched uniforms who usually just wave at stray cows and yell at students for sitting on lawns.

But this time? No one was listening. The guards tried their best—blew a whistle or two, flexed a few eyebrows—but it was like throwing paper planes at a hurricane. Within minutes, *they* got swept into the madness. One even lost his lathi to a boy shouting, “ये लाठी अब जनता के पास है!” (This stick now belongs to the people!)

Panic mode: DESASTER LEVEL.

Realizing they were in over their heads—and that their window budget had officially burst—they made the final call: **Bring in the police.**

And just like that, sirens blared, chaos froze mid-punch, and the form submission process was *suspended indefinitely*. You’d think that would be the end of it. But no. We were students. And students, my friend, *never* read the fine print—or the bold, blinking CCTV signs.

Because yes, *CCTV cameras were everywhere*. And yes, they were working. Recording. Zooming in. Capturing each glorious angle: the punch, the smash, the collar grab, the lad who tried to escape with a table fan (don't ask why).

And so, days later, summonses began to fly like exam results.

One by one, the "*Face Seen on Camera*" squad received handwritten invitations from the principal's office. Not for tea—but for *trouble*.

We were all asked to report, explain, justify, and in some cases... apologize with folded hands.

The interrogation began.

We were summoned into the Principal's office like accused contestants in a very serious reality show called *Who Started the Riot?*

Everyone gave the same tired, copy-paste answer—voice calm, face innocent, tone robotic.

"Sir, I don't know anything. I was just... there."

It was the same line, repeated like a group chant, as if we'd all been coached by the same underperforming lawyer.

But as always, lies have short legs and college CCTV has *very long* arms.

Slowly, cracks appeared. The rehearsed answers started to wobble. Someone slipped. Someone else tried to over-explain. And then someone—possibly Sheetesh, who can't lie to save his life—accidentally blurted out the full story.

And just like that, the entire timeline unraveled like a badly tied shoelace.

The chaos, the smashed counter, the flying clerk—it all traced back to one tiny, ridiculous, two-pice detail: **a missing pin**.

When this sacred truth finally reached the Principal's ears, the man visibly combusted.

His face turned red—not *pinkish blush red*, but full-blown *Angry Tam* red.

His Mustache twitched. His chair creaked in fear. The air in the room dropped ten degrees from the sheer force of his volcanic fury.

“A *pin*?

All this... for a *pin*?” he thundered, as if the word itself had betrayed him personally.

It felt like we were witnessing a man go through the five stages of grief—except all five were just different levels of rage.

Principal stared at us, his eyes wide, his forehead pulsing like a ticking time bomb. Then, in a voice that trembled with a mix of rage, heartbreak, and existential confusion, he said:

**“Just for one pin... you people did all this?”**

It wasn't a question. It was a spiritual crisis.

You could practically hear his soul whispering, “*I got a PhD for this?*”

He looked at us like we were aliens who'd landed just to mess with administrative order. Honestly, if someone had added background music—something dramatic with violins—it would've been a perfect scene from a tragic biopic: ***The Principal and the Pin.***

He didn't say it once.

He didn't say it twice.

He said it **four** times.

Louder. Angrier. More dramatic each round.

“*Just for one pin... you people did all this?*”

“**JUST** for one pin?”



“*One. Single. Pin?*”

“पिन के लिए तोड़-फोड़?!”

By the fourth time, it felt less like a question and more like the trailer for a psychological thriller. We half-expected him to flip the desk and shout “*I QUIT!*”

And that’s when it hit us.

This wasn’t just about us. No, no. This *pin* had clearly unlocked something far deeper in our Principal—a well of frustration built up over years of broken furniture, missing attendance registers, and students who thought “internal assessment” meant *guesswork*.

What followed wasn’t a scolding. It was an emotional avalanche. A verbal monsoon.

We got roasted. Char-grilled. Slow-cooked in pure academic rage. No filter, no forgiveness. His words sliced through the air like flying chalk pieces.

But the real shocker?

He turned to the staff—and unleashed a second, even deadlier monologue. He didn’t just scold them. He dragged in their ancestors, their future generations, their neighbours, and possibly their bloodline.

“तुम लोगों के कारण... पिन भी स्टूडेंट्स को लाना पड़ता है?!”

(“Because of you people... even PINS have to be brought by students?!”)

We watched, frozen, as the staff wilted like under-watered houseplants. One clerk looked like he was trying to sink into the floor tiles. Another pretended to take notes—possibly his resignation letter.

The air grew so thick, even the fan slowed down, like it didn’t want to be involved.

By the end, we all just stood there—quiet, humbled, and mildly traumatized by the sheer energy this man had summoned over stationery.

One thing was certain: We would never forget this moment.

Or the pin.

*Never* the pin.

The principal, now fully transformed into a one-man CBI raid, turned his fiery gaze to the staff and let loose.

“A *pin*,” he thundered, “is the most basic, essential, no-nonsense item in an office! So *why*, in the name of all things bureaucratic, was it *missing* from *this* office?!”

Dead silence. You could hear the emotional damage landing with each word.

“If a student forgets a pin, it’s the office’s job to *provide* one! You people get money for stationery, right? You file bills for pens, registers, paper clips, tea cups, staplers, punching machines, holy incense—so *where*, tell me *where* did the money for the pins go?!”

No one answered.

One clerk suddenly found something deeply fascinating about the floor tiles. Another began pretending to read a file upside down.

The room was so quiet.

It was less of a scolding and more of a full-blown audit, live and uncut. For a moment, we genuinely feared someone would be asked to produce a physical pin budget on the spot.

And just like that, the blame spotlight shifted—*clean sweep* from us to them.

Honestly? It was beautiful.

Not a single staff member dared to utter a word. Mouths shut, eyes down, souls temporarily logged out. They stood frozen like schoolkids caught cheating with the answer sheet still in hand. The

principal's fury hovered in the room like thick fog, and not even the boldest peon dared to clear his throat.

Meanwhile, *we*—the so-called troublemakers—exchanged silent glances behind our most innocent expressions. Eyebrows raised, lips twitching, shoulders shaking ever so slightly.

We were *dying* inside.

The tension in the room could've bent steel—but somehow, that only made it funnier. Every time one of us made eye contact with another, it triggered a fresh wave of suppressed giggles. It was like being in a serious funeral and suddenly remembering a meme.

And the best part? The staff had no idea. While they stood there mentally reviewing their pin-related sins, we were silently high-fiving each other with our eyes.

In that moment of shared mischief, no one had to say a word. We all knew: this legendary '*Pin Kaand*' had officially entered the Hall of Fame.

Eventually, the principal took a long, deep breath—the kind that says "*I've given up, but I'm doing it officially.*" He looked at us, saw the half-scared, half-smirking faces in front of him, and came to a conclusion:

These weren't hardened criminals.

We were just... **reckless hostel boys with too much time, too little sleep, and one missing pin.**

And just like that, the tension deflated. No punishments. No suspensions. Not even a warning letter (though he looked like he *really* wanted to write one just for closure).

Instead, we were told to pack up and go back to the hostel.

And so, we returned.

Back to our kingdom of steel cots, noisy fans, and overflowing teacups. Within minutes, the tea was brewing again, and so was the gossip. We all sat down in our usual spot, and the post-fight

commentary began—live and unfiltered. “Bhai, did you see the clerk’s face when Sheetesh grabbed his collar? *Oscar-worthy panic!*”

“Jimmy tried to jump in but got stuck on the counter grill, remember?”

Everyone had their own version, their own dramatic retelling of the Great Pin Uprising. What started as serious reflection quickly turned into a full-blown comedy show. Even the boys who hadn’t been there listened like we were war veterans returning from the frontlines. Laughter filled the room. Even our bruised egos got bandaged with jokes.

And that’s how it went—what began as a bureaucratic tragedy ended in chai-fuelled legend. A story for the hostel archives.

One that would be told for years to come, always starting the same way: “भाई, याद है वो पिन वाला कांड?” (Bro, remember that pin incident?)

After the legendary *Pin Kaand*, the college finally set a brand-new deadline for form submissions—round two, hopefully without flying stationery or shattered glass.

This time, though, I felt no urge to play the role of Form Submission Warrior. No front-of-the-line drama for me, thank you very much. I decided to take it easy, woke up a bit late, sipped my chai in peace, and casually strolled into college well after the office had opened.

But what I saw when I got there?

### **Plot twist.**

Not a single form had been submitted. Not. One.

The line was there, alright—students standing around like background characters waiting for the script to start.

But the staff? Oh, they weren’t accepting *anything*.

I blinked, confused. Had I walked into a government office on lunch break? Was this a prank? Had we all missed a secret memo?

The place, which I had mentally prepared to be a madhouse of paper-wielding panic, was eerily calm. Too calm.

And instead of feeling stressed, I felt oddly... relieved. Like I had shown up late to a disaster, only to find out it had been postponed due to technical difficulties. Now I was just curious—*what exactly was going on this time?*

Because if college life had taught me anything, it was this: if nothing looks wrong, something is definitely cooking.

By this point, it was official—I **had become the undisputed champion of the ‘Great Form War.’**

My classmates, still traumatized by the pin episode and probably a little scared of the principal’s blood pressure, looked at me with a weird mix of admiration and mild concern. They all agreed—“भाई, फॉर्म तो तू ही देगा पहलो” (Bro, you’re definitely submitting first this time.)

And honestly? They weren’t wrong.

I walked to the counter like a seasoned warrior returning to the battlefield. And as I handed over my form, peacefully, calmly, with no violence in sight, I smiled.

Victory had never tasted so... bureaucratic.

Everyone quickly realized: *this guy isn’t messing around*. After surviving clerks, chaos, shattered windows, and spiritual-level scoldings, I had earned the sacred right to submit this form first—or die (emotionally) trying.

And so, a decision was made—**by popular vote and fear of delay**—that I should be the one to lead the charge. My classmates nodded solemnly, some patted my back like I was heading into war, and one guy whispered, “लीजेंड है तू भाई!” (You’re a legend, bro.)

The atmosphere shifted. I wasn't just holding a form—I was carrying the collective hopes, dreams, and internal marks of half the batch.

And with that, I stepped forward... **heart racing, palms sweaty**, ready to do the one heroic act of the day: submit the form.

The clerk looked at me... **and said**, “Aah! No pin attached!”

**Silence.**

Not just normal silence—**dead silence**. You could hear a stapler drop three rooms away.

Then suddenly... he bursts out laughing.

“Relax! We have plenty of pins. I'm just joking!”

Everyone blinked. Some tried to laugh nervously. Some just stared, like their brains had short-circuited.

And me? I almost toppled over from the adrenaline whiplash.

After that epic showdown, our reputation didn't just take a hit—it *skyrocketed into infamy*. We weren't regular students anymore. No, sir. We had become **form-submission legends**, the stuff of hostel gossip and clerical nightmares.

The impact? Wild.

Even the third-years—those campus veterans who usually walked around like they owned the air, the ground, and occasionally the mess food—suddenly developed a strange new personality trait: **nervousness**.

These were the same guys who used to toss their bikes into no-parking zones with god like confidence and shout across corridors like they were announcing cricket commentary. But now?

They'd *pause* when they saw us. *Look down. Walk around.* You could almost hear their inner monologue:

*“Oh no, it's those lunatics who rioted over a pin. Better not make eye contact.”*

Some even began whispering our names like they were invoking dark spirits.

“भाई... वो पिन वाले हैं ना?” (“Bro... aren’t those the pin guys?”)

With our exam prep in full swing, time started doing that annoying thing it always does before exams—**it sprinted**.

One moment we were just casually underlining chapter headings, and the next—*boom!*—exam day was breathing down our necks like an unpaid canteen bill.

This time, our exam centre was none other than Patna Sahib Women’s College. Fancy name, serious vibes. But when we got there, what we saw was nothing short of an academic carnival.

Turns out, it wasn’t just our college. Nope. **Four different colleges** had been herded into the same venue like a cross-cultural crash course in panic.

The place was buzzing.

Some students were grouped like cramming cults, speed-reading notes as if scanning them fast enough would somehow burn the answers into their souls.

Others were pacing solo—muttering formulas under their breath, hands flying in the air like they were negotiating with the exam gods.

One guy stood frozen, staring at a tree, probably hoping the laws of osmosis would transfer the syllabus from the breeze into his brain.

It was chaos. Beautiful, glorious, *pre-exam chaos*. A perfect blend of hope, desperation, and whatever that sticky nervous smell is that clings to exam halls.

And there we were, in the middle of it all—bags slung, admit cards folded 16 times, pretending to be calm.

I've always been fascinated—and *mildly amused*—by this strange species of students who treat the last five minutes before an exam like the final lap of a Formula One race.

They're flipping through notebooks like they're decoding secret government files. Hair messy, eyes wild, mumbling definitions as if the exam gods might magically beam answers into their brains if they just squint hard enough.

It's like trying to fill a water tank during a fire—pure chaos, zero efficiency.

As I stood there observing the drama, I spotted one group of students who'd clearly given up on all things academic. They were cracking jokes, laughing loudly, and radiating the kind of carefree confidence that only comes from *knowing absolutely nothing*. And being *okay* with it.

Meanwhile, a few others were strolling through the exam venue like they were on a casual date instead of at ground zero of a university exam. Were they here to write a paper or impress someone with their tragic sense of timing and borrowed cologne?

The whole scene was like a strange soup of panic, perfume, and misplaced priorities.

And there I was, silently sipping the chaos like hot chai, wondering:

*Is this how toppers are made?*

Nope.

One by one, we shuffled to the notice board like curious sheep, scanning the chaos of roll numbers and room assignments with the intensity of detectives trying to crack a case. And every time one of us spotted a familiar name in the same room? —instant relief.

The campus was buzzing with typical exam-day energy. Students were talking, laughing, comparing pens like they were secret weapons, and giving completely unasked-for advice about “important chapters” that none of us had actually read.



But just as I was soaking in this cheerful mess, something stopped me cold.

Off to the side—away from the giggles and last-minute cramming—stood a girl. Alone. Shoulders trembling, tears running down her cheeks, and sobbing like the exam had already declared her a failure before she even stepped into the room.

It was the kind of cry that hit you straight in the gut. No drama, no attention-seeking—just pure heartbreak. The kind that didn't care if it was in public or not.

And suddenly, all the noise around us—the jokes, the bragging, the guy who was dramatically pretending to forget admit card for the fourth time—it all faded for a second.

Because in that moment, right in the middle of our great finding seats prep, someone was quietly losing a battle we couldn't see.

And I couldn't help but wonder—was it exam fear? Something deeper? Or just life being life at the *worst* possible time?

Either way, it reminded me: while most of us were stressed about question papers, some people were carrying a whole lot more than textbooks into that hall.

Right in the middle of the exam-day chaos—with students pacing like zombies, some whispering formulas to trees, others rehearsing entire answer sheets out loud—I spotted her.

A girl, standing alone in the crowd.

From a distance, she looked composed—hair tied neatly, clothes crisp, bag slung just right. The kind of student who'd probably color-coded her notes and highlight headers for fun.

But then... tears.

And not the silent, cinematic kind where one tear rolls down the cheek while soft music plays in the background. No, no. These

were full-on, unfiltered, **“I-don’t-care-who’s-watching” sobs**. The kind of cry that makes you forget exams even exist for a second.

Her shoulders shook, her face scrunched up, and yet—nobody really stopped. Most folks just gave that classic desi glance: long stare, head tilt, mental gossip update... and walked on.

But me? I couldn’t.

I don’t know what came over me—maybe it was the human inside me trying to break free from the exam-stressed zombie I’d become—but I walked up to her.

I kept my voice soft.

“Hey... what happened? Is everything okay? Can I help?”

And in that moment, I wasn’t a first-year student panicking over an exam. I was just a fellow human trying to help someone who clearly needed *more* than just a pen.

Because sometimes, even in the middle of total academic mayhem, **someone’s breakdown matters more than someone else’s syllabus**.

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand and said in the tiniest voice, **“My roll number isn’t on the list. How will I take the exam?”**

Now, I may have been half-dead inside from exam stress, but even I knew—this was not the time to panic.

So, I took her admit card and turned to Jimmy, my trusted right-hand man.

**“Jimmy,”** I said, with all the calm of a detective, **“go. Find her roll number. Properly.”**

And just like that, Jimmy transformed.

He didn’t just walk—he *glided* toward the notice board like a man on a mission. Within seconds, his eyes scanned those chaotic

lists with the precision of a human barcode reader. Room number, roll number, her forefather name! —**bam!** Found. No delay.

Because Jimmy wasn't your average student. He'd become a **professional roll-number hunter**. Blindfold him and he could still find your room number with 93% accuracy and a bonus prediction about who you'll sit next to.

And honestly, that was just one of our group's many talents.

We were a strange, gifted bunch. One guy could tell a girl's hometown just by how she tied her dupatta and her smile. Another claimed he could guess someone's star sign based on how they held a pen.

But what we truly excelled at?

**Turning total strangers into friends before the bell rang.**

Once we cracked the mystery of her missing roll number and located her exam room, we became her unofficial bodyguards—minus the sunglasses and earpieces.

We walked her through the sterile, echoing corridor like it was a red carpet and she was headed to the award... or at least a battle with 3-hour question papers and a very judgmental invigilator.

When we reached the room, Jimmy gently placed her bag in the corner like it was a newborn puppy. No dramatic speeches, no violins playing—just a quiet moment and a couple of reassuring smiles that said, **“You’ve got this.”**

She looked at us with those slightly nervous, slightly grateful eyes—the kind that say *thank you* a hundred times without using a single word.

And with that, we gave her a final nod, turned around, and made our exit like exam-day superheroes who'd just completed their side mission.

She stayed behind, settled in, and for the first time that morning, actually looked ready. Calm. Like someone who knew she wasn't alone anymore.

The exams had officially kicked off, and shockingly—I was doing pretty well.

Two papers down, zero emotional breakdowns, and I still remembered my roll number without flipping my admit card. That's a win in my book.

It was Day 3 of our academic endurance test, and I was marching up the stairs like a man on a mission—confidence in my step, answer frames loaded in my brain, and a pen that hadn't yet betrayed me.

That's when I saw *her*.

Coming down the stairs was a girl I'd noticed on Day One—yes, **that** girl(roll no missing). The one who had somehow managed to look exam-ready and effortlessly elegant at the same time. I don't know what she studied, but her vibe screamed "confident."

She was walking with three or four other girls, all of them laughing like they'd just won the lottery instead of preparing to write three hours of academic torture. Their giggles bounced off the walls of the stairwell like a Disney soundtrack.

There I was, mentally revising theories of elasticity, and there *they* were—turning the exam centre into a rom-com set.

## **Day 2 :**

That's the same girl with spectacles who couldn't find her roll number in the schedule list.

Yes, She was walking down the stairs like a scene straight out of a Bollywood song—graceful, glowing, and absolutely unbothered by the chaos of exams. And then it happened.

She looked at me.

Not a casual look, not a polite glance. A full-on, **sunshine-packed, soul-lifting smile** that could've ended wars and started butterflies in my stomach at the same time.

But then... destiny (and gravity) had other plans.

Right in the middle of that heart-melting smile, **her foot slipped**.

Yes. Slipped.

Like a banana peel moment sent straight from the universe for maximum impact.

Before I could even process what was happening, she was no longer gracefully descending. Nope.

She was **spiraling**—arms flailing, dupatta flying like a superhero cape, her expression switching from "Hello, charming stranger" to "Oh no, physics is real!" in 0.3 seconds.

And she was coming **straight over me**.

My brain, which had been busy decoding her smile two seconds ago, now went completely blank. I just stood there, eyes wide, feet stuck to the floor like I was auditioning to be a statue.

She crashed into me like a one-woman avalanche of perfume, bangles, and sheer panic. We both went down like dominoes—her on top, me flat on my back, wondering if this was what falling in love literally felt like.

The hallway went silent for a moment. Then the crowd rushed over, gasping dramatically as if they were extras in a daily soap.

And me?

I was just lying there, dazed, looking up at the ceiling, thinking:

*Well... that escalated quickly.*

Everything happened so fast, I didn't have time to think. One second she was smiling, the next she was mid-air, tumbling toward me like a human meteor.

Instinct kicked in. I reached out—**both hands**, hero mode activated—hoping to stop her fall and save the day like a true movie scene.

And I *did* catch her.

Sort of.

Technically.

But not exactly in the way I would've preferred.

Because in the chaos of the moment—arms flailing, bodies moving faster than logic, but to my utter astonishment and deep embarrassment, my hands inadvertently made contact with those parts of her body that are typically considered highly inappropriate to touch in a social context. Not by choice, not on purpose... but just by pure, cruel coordination failure and stimuli.

It was the kind of accidental contact that instantly fries your brain like a cheap inverter during load shedding.

Her eyes widened in shock.

My face turned the exact colour of a ripe tomato that just found out it's being turned into chutney.

I wanted the earth to open up, swallow me whole, and politely erase all CCTV footage.

"Sorry!" I blurted, voice cracking like a teenage boy in a school play.

"I didn't—I mean—it wasn't—I was just trying to save you, not... not touch you—like that! I swear!"

She didn't say anything for a second. Just blinked. Then blinked again. And then, to my absolute surprise... the whole situation had gone from tragic to *comedy scene* in under five seconds.

Crowd around us? Staring.

Jimmy? Frozen like a statue.

Me? Questioning every life decision that brought me to this moment.

There I was—**completely frozen**, like a goat that had just made eye contact with a speeding truck.

My hands were locked in place, gripping tightly those sensitive things. My brain screamed, *“Let go, you idiot!”*

but another part whispered, *“If you do, she’ll roll down the stairs like a suitcase!”*

So I stood there, like a confused statue with very questionable hand placement, stuck in the world’s worst game of “free the birds or hold?”

I mean, this was clearly not how I’d pictured being close to her. This wasn’t a romantic scene—this was a **high-speed collision of awkwardness and gravity**, sponsored by Newton’s laws and bad luck.

Every passing second felt like a century. The world faded, time slowed down.

My inner monologue was losing it:

*“Okay. If I move, she falls. If I don’t move, she sues.*

*What do I do? Think, man, think!*

*Should I apologize now?*

*Should I write a will?*

*Should I change colleges and move to Nepal?”*

Meanwhile, she was balancing herself halfway between dignity and disaster, eyes wide, probably wondering whether I was a saviour... or a creep with panicked eyebrows.

And just when I thought the embarrassment couldn’t get any worse...

**Jimmy**, Eyes wide. Mouth open.

So now I had an audience.

Fantastic.

“First-Year Boy Accidentally Reinvents Hugging Techniques. Which needs Police Investigating.”

Eventually, she steadied herself, took one gentle step down, and finally freed us both from the accidental full-body physics experiment we’d just conducted.

I exhaled, like I’d just defused a bomb.

And all I could whisper was, **“I’m... really, really sorry.”**

As I stood there trying to make sense of what was happening, one thought kept looping in my head: **“Bro, I think I’m dying. Emotionally. Spiritually. Possibly even cellularly.”**

It felt like someone had plugged a vacuum cleaner into my soul and hit the MAX button.

My body? Useless.

My energy? Gone.

My face? Pale red.

Honestly, if someone had stabbed me right then, I doubt a single drop of blood would’ve come out.

*“Sorry, bro. We’re all out of fluids. Try again next semester.”*

I was this close to collapsing dramatically like a Shakespearean side character when I looked around—and that’s when things went from “bad” to “what-the-actual-shame.”

**Everyone around me had turned into statues.**

Not like “standing still out of shock” statues—**actual, marble-in-the-museum, ancient-Rome-level stone statues.**

Others were in that classic horror-movie pose—arms half-raised, mouths open, eyes wide with that *“Maa kasam, I wasn’t ready for this”* expression.



If Medusa had come to campus looking for victims, she clearly didn't waste time.

The whole scene looked like a weird, depressing group photo gone horribly wrong. No smiles, just panic frozen in 3D.

My survival instincts? Zero.

My options? Limited.

In a blink, the stairwell transformed from a peaceful passageway into a **full-blown emergency rescue operation**.

Her friends came sprinting in like a well-trained SWAT team—faces pale, arms wide, calling her name as if she were being airlifted out of a natural disaster.

They formed a circle around her, clutching her from behind like human seatbelts, ready to catch her if she so much as sneezed the wrong way.

Meanwhile, **my friends also sprang into action**—like they'd all secretly rehearsed this scene at some point. One grabbed her arms, another got hold of her legs, and suddenly it looked like we were trying to move a fragile statue across a minefield.

And me?

Well, I was standing in the middle of this rescue drama, **still awkwardly attached**, hands planted firmly where **no gentleman's hands should ever wander**, thanks to the unfortunate trajectory of gravity and bad luck.

My brain screamed:

**“Abort! Abort! Hands off the merchandise!”**

With the precision of a bomb disposal unit, I quickly pulled my hands away from the area in question, mentally apologizing to every god I could think of—Hindu, Greek, Marvel Universe, all of them.

The air was thick with panic, embarrassment, and just the tiniest whiff of Axe body spray.

Everyone was talking at once.

Nobody really knew what was happening.

And I was just praying someone would offer me a time machine or at least a large bag to crawl into.

But credit where credit's due—**her friends were incredible.** Calm, fast, no judgment. My friends? Also legends. Quick on their feet, respectful, and shockingly efficient.

We managed to stabilize her, get her to sit on a step, and someone (probably Jimmy) handed her a bottle of water like we were in a cricket timeout.

And for the first time since the fall, she looked up... and smiled.

Which, considering the chaos we'd all just lived through, felt like winning a Nobel Peace Prize in accidental chivalry.

A strange silence settled over the crowd, not the peaceful kind you find in libraries or exam halls—but the heavy, **“something-is-cooking-but-no-one-wants-to-lift-the-lid”** kind.

People glanced at each other—not dramatically, but in that slow, suspicious way characters do in murder mysteries, as if someone had just dropped a secret and the entire room knew exactly who the killer was.

But instead of fear, there were... **smirks.**

Tiny, twitchy, poorly-disguised smirks.

One guy raised an eyebrow.

Someone else let out a half-snort and immediately tried to cover it up by pretending to cough.

The girl in the corner tilted her head just a bit, like *“Oh? So it begins.”*

It was clear:

**Something legendary had just happened.**

And we were all in on it.

The vibe was electric, like the start of a college gossip wildfire that would spread faster than a leaked paper.

No one said anything, but we were all thinking the same thing:

**This story's getting retold at chai stalls, mess halls, and midnight rooftop sessions for the next one years. Minimum.**

The crowd around us was buzzing like a well-lit wedding tent—laughs flying, jokes bouncing off the walls, and everyone acting like the universe had decided to throw a surprise party just for them.

And right in the middle of all this cheer and giggle-fest...

**stood Ruba.**

Arms crossed.

Eyebrows locked in “permanent disapproval” mode.

Lips so tight they looked like they'd been zip-tied shut.

While everyone else looked like they were auditioning for a toothpaste commercial, Ruba looked like she'd come to personally shut the party down with a disciplinary committee and two warning letters.

She wasn't just not smiling—she looked **violently allergic to joy**.

I spotted her the second that girl stepped aside, and boom—there she was, like a storm cloud in the middle of Holi.

The scariest part?

She wasn't saying anything.

She was just *standing there*, glaring at me like I owed her money and had also insulted her dog.

That glare? It had heat.

It was the kind of look that made you instinctively apologize for things you hadn't even done yet.

If eye rolls could kill, I'd already be six feet under, buried with my half-filled exam paper and a posthumous "Sorry, Ruba" note.

Needless to say—I didn't dare make eye contact.

Because one wrong glance, and I had a feeling she'd launch into a verbal monologue that would end with "**Aur tum ho kaun?**" followed by emotional destruction in five languages.

Which, of course, could only mean one thing: **Out of the frying pan... straight into Ruba's laser-eyed death stare.**

She tapped her foot—**tap, tap, tap**—the kind of tapping that wasn't cute or musical.

No, this was the **countdown-to-doom** kind of tap.

And then came her voice.

Sweet.

Polite.

**Devilishly sugar-coated.** Like someone offering you a laddoo made with tiny iron balls.

"Was she the only one you could find to hold?"

Uh-oh. I opened my mouth to explain. But Ruba wasn't finished cooking me alive.

"You hesitate to hug me, but you hugged her like *that*?"

There it was. The *that*.

The kind of *that* that carried enough heat to roast a chicken mid-air.

I panicked. My brain was jammed like the college printer on exam day.

So, like a genius, I went with: "It... it was a mistake!"

Brilliant. Truly Shakespearean damage control.

Ruba tilted her head, smirked the smirk of someone who knew they'd already won, and said—

“Then should make such mistakes with me too, sometimes.”

Checkmate.

Game. Set. Ruba.

And me? I just stood there, trying to decide whether to smile, faint and run away from real life.

Just as I was fumbling around in my brain for a half-decent excuse—something in the “I slipped and accidentally hugged someone” category—**Malik** decided it was the perfect moment to throw me under a moving bus. Again.

The guy has a sixth sense for drama.

Like a Devil's dog who smells gossip from a mile away.

He slid in smoothly, wearing that signature **“I'm here to ruin lives and sip chai”** grin.

“You're absolutely right, Ruba,” he said, nodding with exaggerated wisdom, like some love guru who'd seen too much.

I already knew this was headed south.

“In fact,” he continued, turning to her with the dramatic flair of a courtroom lawyer,

“Bhuvan and I were just discussing the *same* thing.”

I blinked. We were? Since when?

“But I think you may've misread the situation entirely,” Malik added, voice dripping with drama.

“What he was doing back there? That wasn't a hug.”

Ruba raised an eyebrow. My soul exited my ribcage.

“No, no,” Malik insisted, clearly enjoying the chaos, “That was something... **different... holding something heavenly.**

A stunned silence fell over us.

Ruba’s smirk grew sharper.

I, meanwhile, was trying to figure out how to fake my own kidnapping.

Malik, of course, leaned back casually, fully satisfied with his work.

He might as well have dropped a mic and walked away in slow motion.

And just like that, I was no longer in a relationship crisis.

**I was in a full-blown social courtroom, with Malik as the prosecution and Ruba as the judge, jury, and possible executioner.**

Malik wasn’t done yet.

No, sir. The man had tasted blood and was going in for the kill.

He turned to me, eyes twinkling like a five-year-old who’d just stolen an extra cookie, and delivered the final blow:

“And yeah, Bhuvan... you really shouldn’t have **squeezed those oranges.**”

*Dead.*

Ruba froze.

Her head turned toward me like a CCTV camera locking onto a suspect.

Her eyes narrowed into two angry slits, and boom—**judgment day had arrived.**

“You took advantage of the situation,” she said, each word sharp enough to slice through steel.

“You *squeezed* her oranges.”

I flailed. Verbally, emotionally, spiritually.

“I DID NOT!” I protested, voice cracking like a 13-year-old discovering emotions for the first time.

But the damage was done.

Ruba’s eyes flashed, her nose flared, and she shot back with:

“Don’t talk to me again.”

And just like that, she spun on her heel and **stormed off like a dramatic exit had been rehearsed in front of a mirror.**

I stood there, stunned, watching her walk away like it had somewhere better to be.

Meanwhile—**my so-called friends?**

Gone.

Collapsed.

Rolling on the floor like someone had put laughing gas in the air.

Jimmy was holding his stomach like he’d just done 100 sit-ups.

Malik looked like he’d won a reality show.

One of them wheezed out,

“*Squeezed!* Bro said *squeezed!*” juice- juice everywhere!

And me?

I just wanted the Earth to open up and gently swallow me whole. Or at least transport me to a dimension where no one says the word *squeeze* ever again.

The entire exam season turned into a personal punishment arc for me.

While everyone else was stressing about questions, I was battling **Ruba’s cold glares** and my friends’ **unpaid comedy show**, running daily with zero signs of cancellation.

Every time Ruba so much as looked in my direction—which she did rarely, and only with the intensity of someone choosing which brand of insect spray to use on you—**my friends would lose it.**

Like clockwork, they'd nudge each other, nudge me, nudge the air.

“Bhuvan, bro... you really shouldn't have squeezed!”

Cue laughter.

Cue me dying inside.

I tried ignoring it.

Didn't work.

I tried glaring back.

That made it worse.

I tried changing seats.

They followed.

Even when I coughed, someone would whisper,

“Trying to squeeze sympathy now, are we?”

It was like living inside a sitcom where I was the punchline—and also the only guy not laughing.

Meanwhile, Ruba?

Untouchable.

Unreachable.

Unforgiving.

She passed by like an iceberg in a summer storm—cool, silent, dangerous if approached.

And I?



Just a confused sailor floating in a raft of guilt and second-hand embarrassment.

The worst part?

I couldn't even *talk* to her.

Every time I opened my mouth, one of my friends would cough dramatically and go:

"Sssssssqueeze alert!"

I couldn't decide whether to throw my textbooks at them or myself.

Or both.

Studying for exams was already hard.

Studying while being a walking meme?

**Next level.**

Now, I *suspect*—can't prove it, but the gut feeling was strong—that Ruba might have wanted to talk to me.

Maybe once. Maybe twice. Maybe multiple times.

She probably thought of saying something civil, maybe even flashing a small, forgivable smile.

But the problem?

**My friends.**

Every time she so much as breathed in my direction, those human loudspeakers would leap into action like:

"Oye hoye, here comes the orange *Squeezer*!"

And just like that Ruba's potential words would freeze mid-thought and do a graceful U-turn.

What could've been a heart-to-heart ended up as another silent walk-by starring one very grumpy Ruba and one very dead-inside me.

Basically, my friends had unknowingly turned into anti-Ruba security guards.

Their jokes? Bulletproof.

Her patience? Not so much.

And as if that wasn't enough social chaos...

Enter: **The Spectacled Girl.**

Yep, the one who wore those serious librarian-type glasses but somehow still managed to radiate “Hi, I’m available and mildly interested” energy.

She started popping up around me like it was part of her syllabus.

Asking random questions. Smiling way too long.

Making accidental eye contact that was about as accidental as Jimmy spilling tea on your notebook—daily.

And me?

I ignored her. Like a champ.

Not because I didn’t appreciate the attention.

But because I valued *life*.

And more importantly, I valued not being turned into Ruba’s next emotional punching bag.

I’d seen the look in Ruba’s eyes.

It wasn’t just “hurt.”

It was “*Hurt and will set your life on fire using only one eyebrow raise.*”

So yeah, flirting with Spectacle-Girl?

Not worth the risk.

One wrong move, and I'd be writing apology letters in Sanskrit.

And then there was the **spectacled girl**—sweet, quiet, soft-spoken...

And, well, built like a fragile glass jar.

I mean, don't get me wrong—she was lovely in that bookish, gentle way.

But every time I looked at her, I couldn't shake the nervous thought:

*If a fight ever happened, this girl wouldn't last a minute—Ruba would just fold her limbs into her belly like she's packing winter clothes for summer.*

*Heck, she wouldn't survive a glare.*

The comparison was so lopsided it felt like one of those viral internet matchups:

**"In this corner: Ruba—full-time student, part-time destroyer of egos."**

**"And in this corner: A girl who apologizes to furniture when she bumps into it."**

I could practically see the battle already:

Ruba, standing like a boss with that *don't-mess-with-me* stance.

And Spectacled Girl?

Clutching her notebook like a riot shield and possibly whispering ancient prayers.

Let's just say—if Ruba ever got the idea that something *romantic* was brewing between me and Specs...

Well, I'd be attending two funerals: that girl and mine.

It wasn't just a love triangle.

It was **a romantic demolition derby**, and I was stuck in the middle with no helmet.

Even thinking about it gave me anxiety sweats.

So I did the only logical thing a guy could do:

I avoided eye contact with Spectacled Girl like she was carrying live explosives...

...and mentally begged Ruba not to unleash her inner WWE wrestler.

Because if it came to blows?

Let's be real—Specs would lose the fight *before the fight even started*.

And just like that—**the exams were over**.

Done.

Dusted.

Dumped into the giant black hole where traumatic academic memories go to die.

We walked out of the exam hall that final day like war survivors, clutching our pens like they were broken weapons and looking at each other with glassy, dead-eyed relief.

**Freedom had arrived.**

And oh boy, we were ready to greet it like long-lost lovers.

The following month?

A beautiful, chaotic blur.

We laughed like we hadn't been emotionally tortured by syllabus PDFs.

We played, we roamed, we binged on tea and samosas with absolutely zero remorse.

Most of us scattered home, returning to the land of moms who think you're too thin, dads who worry about "government jobs" before asking how your exams went, and cousins who suddenly appear only when cake is involved.

There were naps.

There were snacks.

There were naps **after** snacks.

Basically: bliss.

But—because the universe loves drama—**one thing refused to settle.**

Me.

Ruba.

And that awkward, squeezed tension still floating between us.

We hadn't talked.

Not a word.

Just exchanged the occasional accidental eye contact that could either lead to forgiveness or spontaneous combustion.

And now, with **exam results** creeping up on us like horror movie villains... the silence between us somehow got louder.

Was she angry?

Still annoyed?

Plotting revenge in Excel sheets?

Who knows.

All I knew was—freedom felt amazing.

But it would've felt *way* better if I wasn't constantly wondering whether Ruba was waiting to kill me... or forgive me.

(Spoiler: I wasn't emotionally ready for either.)

So one fine afternoon after exam, post-tea, post- 5 rounds of "Bhuvan shouldn't have squeezed" jokes—I decided I was done being the villain of my own love story.

**It was time for “Operation: Casual Bump Into Ruba and Fix Everything.”**

I waited.

She appeared.

Headphones in, walking like she was on a catwalk designed by anxiety and feminism.

I stepped forward with perfect timing, heart pounding like mid-exam palpitations.

“Hey, Ruba... listen, can we—”

**“SQUEEZE DETECTED!”**

It was Malik.

Of course, it was Malik.

Hiding behind a notice board, whisper-shouting like a cricket commentator on acid.

Ruba froze.

Her face went from neutral to nuclear in two seconds flat.

“Seriously?” she said, arms crossed, eyebrow raised, lips pursed like a slap in slow motion.

“This is your idea of an apology?”

I turned toward Malik to give him the death glare.

Too late.

**Jimmy popped up behind me with a fake walkie-talkie.**

“Sir, Code Red. Repeat: Code Red. Hug-level eye contact confirmed. Permission to mock? Over.”

Everyone in the corridor cracked up like we were hosting open mic night.

I turned back to Ruba, ready to salvage what little dignity I had left.

She was gone.

Vanished.

The only thing left behind? A faint trail of attitude and unresolved romantic tension.

Operation: Casual Bump?

**Mission failed. Spectacularly.**

Among all the things rattling around in my overworked brain, **exam results** sat like a pressure cooker about to blow.

Tension? Oh, it was *everywhere*.

People were pacing like they were waiting outside an operation theatre.

Hostel corridors felt more dramatic than crime thrillers.

Even the chaiwala (tea seller) near the gate had reduced sugar in his tea—probably in mourning.

But weirdly enough?

**I was fine.**

Chill, even.

I was **confident**. Not cocky—just that peaceful kind of confident where your brain says:

“Don’t worry, bro. We might not be toppers, but we aren’t dropouts either.”

Then one afternoon, it happened.

**The notice board was updated.**

**People sprinted toward it as if a swarm of bees were chasing them.**

Hearts thudded.

Jimmy fell down twice and still reached before others.

The air was pure electricity—charged with fear, sweat, and twenty different body sprays.

Me?

I took a deep breath, walked slowly (because drama deserves pacing), and stepped up to the board with the calm of a monk and the stomach of a blender.

My eyes scanned the list...

Line by line...

Roll number by roll number...

And then—boom.

**There it was.**

My name.

My marks.

That sweet, sweet **“PASS”** typed out like divine approval from the academic gods.

Victory wasn't loud.

It was just a quiet nod to myself.

A whispered *“Nice one, Bhuvan”* under my breath.

And then Jimmy screamed behind me:

**“OYE! I PASSED IN MATH! SOMEONE CALL NASA! I'M A MIRACLE!”**

He hadn't even checked his full result yet.

Chaos followed, obviously.

The notice board was under siege.

A **mob of students** had gathered like ants at a sugar spill, pushing, shoving, tiptoeing, and craning their necks as if the results were tickets to a free concert. Eyes darted across the lists, fingers



moved along names like they were decoding ancient scriptures, and everywhere around me, **whispers were flying**.

“Did you see mine?”

“Bro, I passed!”

“OYE! Is this alphabetical or by mark sheet trauma?”

And then came the first cheer.

Then another.

Then a chain reaction of relieved sighs and back-thumping congratulations.

**Good news: Everyone had passed.**

Bad news (if you're a guy with fragile math skills): a few had been **granted the sacred curse of the ‘Math Compartment’**.

Yep—**compartment in Mathematics**. The academic version of a yellow card. Not quite failure, but not a ticket to peace either.

And here’s where it got *interesting*.

Among all the names with a *C* next to “Mathematics”...

**not a single girl.**

Zero.

Zilch.

The entire female population had aced it like they’d solved algebra in their sleep.

The boys?

Well, let’s just say if this were a movie, they were playing the role of “Comic Relief + Background Trauma.”

Naturally, it sparked debate:

“Yaar, are they born with calculator brains or cheat?”

**“Bro, girls don’t study — they just absorb cheat sheets into some secret part of their bodies.”**

“I saw Neha draw nonsense in her notebook during math class, and she still passed.”

A new discovery that hit the campus harder than the hostel’s monthly bedbug epidemic:

**The topper of the class... was Roll Number 9.**

A hush fell over the crowd.

Someone squinted at the board.

Someone else blinked twice.

Someone even removed their glasses, cleaned them, and *still* couldn’t believe it.

Because Roll Number 9... was **me**.

**Bhuvan.**

Silence.

And then—**utter chaos**.

“BHU-VAN?! TOPPER?! HOW!?”

“Wait—Bhuvan who’s always late to class and early to every fight?”

“HE’S THE TOPPER?!”

People were hyperventilating.

One guy was pacing like he’d just seen a ghost.

Another was dramatically holding his head like a failed villain.

And someone actually checked the board again to see if the universe had glitched.

“Arey yaar, does he have a setting in the university or what?”

**“System hack lagta hai...”**

“No...no, I *heard* his future mother-in-law works in the university.”

“She’s in the result department, bro. Straight connection. In-house marks printing.”

And just like that, I went from "That guy with average attendance and legendary bad luck" to...

**“Sarkari Jamai.”**

“After that, I left the college without telling anyone.”

The mystery of "How did Bhuvan top?" had everyone scratching their heads like it was a math problem with no solution.

My classmates, unable to handle the suspense, launched a **search party** like they were tracking a missing celebrity.

Eventually, they gave up and decided to do what all confused students do best—**wait near the gate and pretend to be doing something important.**

And then...

**VROOOOM.**

A sleek car pulled up to the college gate like it was part of a movie scene nobody had paid to see.

The door opened with dramatic flair.

And **I stepped out.**

Feeling cool yet a bit worried at the same time.

Sunglasses on.

But wait—I **wasn’t alone.**

In my arms... was **Lavanyamayi.**

Yes. *The* Lavanyamayi. 3<sup>rd</sup> year my Guardian Angel.

And I was carrying her like a Bollywood hero post-climax, marching toward campus as if *this* was just my normal Tuesday.

You could hear the collective gasp of at least **eight students fainting in slow motion**.

Now, there were two burning questions gripping the campus tighter than the principal's budget:

**How the hell did Bhuvan become the class topper?!**

**And why, in the name of all things gossipy, was Lavanyamayi in his arms?!**

Sony 1.3 megapixel mobiles were out.

Snaps were taken.

Conspiracy theories began brewing faster than wild fire.

"He's in love."

"No yaar, she fainted!"

"Maybe it's both."

"I swear, this guy's life is a treasure hunt series."

And just like that, the legend of Bhuvan had officially begun.

**Now, let's rewind to the *origin story* of this disaster.**

You see, ever since that little "oops-I-caught-a-girl-falling-and-accidentally-touched-a-place-I-shouldn't-have" moment at the exam centre, **Ruba had been in full volcano mode**.

Not the "slightly irritated" kind of volcano either.

We're talking **Mount Emotional Vesuvius**, complete with tremors, lava eyes, and emotional ash clouds.

And just when I thought things couldn't possibly get worse...

**They did.**

The universe, it seemed, had taken a personal oath to make my life a **real-time soap opera**.

One second, Ruba was already sulking in the corner like a rejected reality show contestant,

The next—boom—a **full-blown circus was unfolding** around us.

Angry whispers.

Gasps.

Stares.

People dramatically putting their hands on their hips and astonished.

I wanted to scream, “IT WAS JUST BAD TIMING AND BAD BALANCE!”

But that probably wouldn’t have helped.

Because for Ruba, this wasn’t just an accident.

This was betrayal.

**Emotional treason.**

A scandal worthy of a college newsletter headline:

*“Boy Touches another Girl. Girlfriend Goes Thermonuclear.”*

The chaos was unreal.

I blinked once and realized—I **was now the villain in a story I didn’t even know I was starring in.**

There I was, heart thudding like a dhol(drum) at a Punjabi wedding, when suddenly—**Manikant** bolted.

Yes, **that** Manikant.

**Unpredictable and able to twist a lie into more truth than truth itself.**

Now he was sprinting toward the main road like a man possessed by black magic—shirt half-tucked, hair flying, arms flailing as if auditioning for an emotional climax scene in a 90s movies.

“He’s going to do it!” someone yelled.

**“He’s going to throw himself under the bus!”**

And not metaphorically. **An actual bus.** Under those yellow city buses, to be precise.

Just as the rest of us prepared to scream, stop him, or at least record it for hostel gossip, **Manikant suddenly froze.**

Mid-dash. Mid-drama.

Like someone had hit the pause button on his emotional traumas.

His legs stopped.

His arms dropped.

His expression shifted from that of a failed suicide attempt to a Windows error message. Why?

**Because Mani saw Lavanyamayi faint in my arms — and not too far away, Ruba was standing there.**

Like an emotionally-charged missile.

Eyes locked on **me** with a glare so powerful it could’ve melted steel... or at least my confidence.

She wasn’t weeping.

She wasn’t shouting in her mind.

She was just *staring*—that intense, soul-piercing, “I-know-what-you-did-last-semester” kind of stare.

The entire road fell silent.

Even the rickshaw horns stopped.

Even the crows looked uncomfortable.

Her expression said one thing, loud and clear:

“I saw everything. I know everything.

And you, Bhuvan...

**You're finished."**

At that point... it probably did.

**Coming clean was the only way out.**

Well—either that, or join Manikant in his dramatic sprint toward the bus for suicide.

Which... honestly... was starting to look like the easier option.

One thing was certain: I had a lot of explaining to do...

To be cont...