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Author's Note

Lights, Camera, Mayhem: Once Upon a Time in Bollywood!

Dear readers,

My debut book and, frankly, my love letter to Hindi cinema is specifically, the kind of love letter you write after consuming intoxicants, but don't worry, I'm not actually tripping on anything (too broke for that luxury).

Before we begin, a small but important disclaimer: this book is a work of fiction. While it draws inspiration from the colourful legends, rumours, urban myths, industry gossip, and occasional real events that have surrounded Hindi cinema for decades, the stories, conversations, situations, and interpretations presented here are products of imagination. If a character, incident, or scandal feels suspiciously familiar, that's probably because Bollywood itself has always been far stranger than fiction.

This book is not a thesis on Bollywood but a mad, mad tribute to the single greatest cinematic period in human history: the Wild '90s Bollywood. If you missed it, picture the Wild West, but replace the horses with brightly colored Premier

Padmini taxis and the gun duels with choreographed dance battles in impossible locations. I call it the Wild 90s, and it was gloriously unhinged.

Behind the scenes, the industry was a delightful cocktail of underworld ties, guns, endless gossip, and questionable financial ethics—a true circus of human drama. But on screen, the logic was even stranger. How else can you explain a hero, clearly earning a middle-class salary, suddenly teleporting his heroine to the Swiss Alps for a song? Or watching a single hero defeat ten goons, all of whom politely wait their turn to be punched, without messing up his immaculate coiffure? Clearly, those scripts were written either at gunpoint or while a director is high on a cocktail of alcohol and cocaine. And that's why we were obsessed: the sheer, unapologetic, in-your-face FUN.

In an age where critics now demand things like 'logic' and 'character development,' I say: "To hell with sense!" I celebrate the madness: Govinda in his retina-searing red shirt and yellow pants, dancing on a Juhu footpath, or SRK successfully convincing every engaged woman in North India to ditch her respectable fiancè. My personal favourite? Akshay Kumar somehow managed to pin the WWE star The Undertaker. This book is a chance to collectively put on our nostalgia goggles and relive that glorious, chaotic absurdity.

To make the journey even more enjoyable, most chapters begin with a collection of fascinating Bollywood trivia, bizarre behind-the-scenes stories, forgotten industry anecdotes, and legendary rumours from different eras of Hindi cinema. Some

are true, some are disputed, some have grown larger than life through decades of retelling—and all of them help paint a picture of an industry that has always thrived somewhere between reality and mythology.

Right now, my personal life is serving up a script that involves heart break, grief, financial doldrums and some truly poor life choices. But instead of writing that miserable drama, I decided to focus on the one thing that still brings reliable joy: this beautiful, chaotic cinematic history. This book is my escape, and I hope it becomes yours, too.

Now, the madness is in your hands. I hope you love it.

An Introduction to the Dream Factory

The book you hold in your hands is a love letter, a dramatic slow-motion running-towards-each-other reunion—to the Hindi film industry. Or as we fondly call it: Bollywood, the desi remix of "Hollywood," because we Indians never see a foreign concept without thinking, "*Arre, hum bhi bana lenge.*"

But before the story truly begins, let's rewind—way back—into the glorious chaos from which Indian cinema emerged.

Once upon a time, long before gym-honed heroes and paparazzi chasing star kids who hadn't even learned alphabets, India had one man, one dream, and one camera that looked like it was assembled from leftover tongs at a blacksmith's summer clearance sale. That man was **Dhundiraj Govind Phalke**—known to future award committees as *Dadasaheb Phalke,* and unofficially, the stubborn father of Indian cinema.

Legend has it, he watched a foreign film and had an epiphany somewhere between divine enlightenment and midlife crisis. So naturally, he did what all great Indian men do when

inspiration strikes—pawned his wife's jewellery. (Truly proving cinema in India began as a joint family business.)

With this, he created *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913.

Did it have "production value"? Absolutely not. What it had was mythology, passion, spirit—and fully grown men wearing sarees because women acting in films was considered more scandalous than eating non-veg on a temple street. Thus, Indian cinema was born with a wig, a saree, and more courage than budget.

The early decades featured "silent films," except theaters themselves were anything but silent. Live musicians played tabla and harmonium, and the occasional enthusiastic uncle provided loud commentary: "*Arre hero ko left jaana chahiye tha!"* It was audience participation long before Twitter was invented.

Most films were mythological or historical—largely to avoid colonial censorship. Nobody could arrest a filmmaker for showing Rama defeating Ravana... unless the British officer was feeling very insecure that day.

Then came 1931, the Diwali of Indian cinema: ***Alam Ara***. India discovered sound. Imagine the shock—yesterday the screen moved; today it sings, cries, scolds, and plays violin from absolutely nowhere. This triggered a national awakening: songs weren't added to films; songs BECAME films.

The era birthed legends like *K. L. Saigal*, who sang like sadness itself, was renting a room in his throat. *Devika Rani*

brought sophistication; Fearless Nadia brought whips, stunts, and the earliest form of female action-hero swagger—before feminism had even found a pen.

Filmmakers couldn't openly criticize colonial rule, so they used metaphors. Tyrant kings, corrupt landlords, oppressed villagers—cinema halls became underground emotional battlegrounds. Common people couldn't protest outside openly, but inside a dark theater, they could clap, whistle, and spiritually overthrow empires.

By the 1940s, cinema had built a shared emotional dictionary. India didn't speak one language—but it cried the same when Saigal sang, cheered the same when Ashok Kumar outsmarted villains, and sighed the same when Devdas made terrible life decisions.

So by the time independence arrived in 1947, the country was already united—not by politics, geography, or maps, but by movies. India became a nation because first, it became an audience.

Films had quietly built a shared emotional vocabulary in a country where people didn't all speak the same language, follow the same customs, or eat the same spices. Before India became a formal nation, it became an audience. And that may be cinema's greatest magic trick of all.

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PROLOGUE
The Wild Wild 90s Bombay.

Bombay. Yes, Bombay. Not Mumbai, nor whatever name our Netas will rebrand next week for maximum vote yield. In this book, it remains Bombay—because our story belongs to that glorious era of the 90s when it was still called that. And before the MNS begins warming up their effigy-burning arms, let me offer two reassurances:

-This book is unlikely to be a bestseller.

-It's in English, so they'll never know it exists.

Bombay: the Dream Factory, the city that never sleeps, the city that pickpockets your optimism and then sells it back at premium rates. A place where every third person is a writer, every fifth is an actor, and every tenth is claiming to be "launching something big, bro." Every day, trainloads of fresh dreamers arrive—suitcase in one hand, ambition in the other—hoping a camera will magically zoom in on their destiny.

The air itself is cinematic: a heady blend of diesel fumes, samosa smoke, low-grade monsoon fungus, and the mild but persistent fragrance of crushed dreams. If bottled, the perfume would be called Eau de Maybe Next Friday.

Local trains spit out newcomers from towns where the week's highlight is a cow blocking traffic. They join audition queues long enough to qualify as pilgrimage routes. And every Friday, someone's future is either launched into orbit—or shoved under the nearest BEST bus.

Our tale unfolds in the 90s, that neon-soaked decade after the VHS-ravaged 80s. Films then were crafted for those who couldn't afford a TV, resulting in a chaotic buffet of tropes: Govinda's retina-melting pants, Rishi Kapoor's sweater fetish, Mithun avenging his molested sister in every movie in 72 different ways while smiling like it was a toothpaste ad.

Behind the dance numbers simmered rumours of gangsters, affairs, substances, and deals dodgier than a Bandra landlord's lease.

At the centre stands Aatish Kapoor, once the monarch of UP-Bihar cinema, now fading like Doordarshan reception in a thunderstorm. Alongside him: Dhruv Kumar (clearly not his real name), a Kanpur boy with stars in his eyes and a sense of direction so bad he could get lost in a straight line.

Welcome to the madness. Fasten your seat belts and get ready for...

Lights,Camera,Mayhem: Once Upon a Time in Bollywood

Chapter 1:

Aatish Kapoor- The Man, The Myth, The Eyebrow

This story is not about names. It is about dreams. Dreams that sparkle in the eyes of every hopeful who arrives in Bombay from dusty villages and overcrowded small towns, carrying one overstuffed suitcase, two decent shirts, and confidence wildly disproportionate to their actual talent. They come chasing the flicker of silver screens, the promise of stardom, and the intoxicating, slightly sweaty magic of the word Bollywood. They arrive without contacts, money, or even a backup plan—just a dangerous amount of faith that one day their carefully rehearsed tragic stare, dramatic side profile, or emotionally unstable hair flip will make them famous enough to appear in film magazines sandwiched between fairness cream advertisements and scandalous breakup rumours.

It was a world built equally on dreams, gossip, ego, fake networking, and vada pavs prepared under conditions that could defeat the human immune system.

Bombay, of course, welcomed these dreamers the way the sea welcomes plastic bags—with great enthusiasm initially, before casually swallowing them forever. Most eventually disappeared into the city's digestive system, resurfacing years later as struggling insurance agents, salesmen in electronic shops, assistant managers at paan-stained lodges, or men who endlessly told drunk relatives at weddings, "*Bas ek film miss ho gayi warna aaj life alag hoti.*"

But every year, a few survived long enough to become actors, superstars, character artists or simply cautionary tales, or politicians—which, in Bollywood, were often just different stages of the same disease.

Bollywood in the 80s—where our story truly begins—was a magnificent madhouse where producers financed films with money nobody politely enquired about, heroes delivered emotional monologues about "cinema as art" before dancing atop moving trucks in neon clothes, and every struggler in Bombay believed destiny was merely one slow-motion entry shot away. It was an industry running entirely on dreams, gossip, ego, gutka, and untraceable cash. Half the films looked like they were written during a power cut, yet somehow the entire country watched them with religious devotion.

And into this glorious circus , entered Aatish Kapoor. He was a nepo kid long before Kangana Ranaut turned the word into Bollywood's favourite nuclear weapon and television anchors discovered the spiritual joy of screaming "insider versus outsider" every night like they were covering a civil war

instead of people dancing around Swiss trees. This was also before star kids began narrating tales of "struggle" because their Audi once broke down outside Mannat or a casting director took an entire two days to return their call.

But let's not imagine Aatish as some prince of Bollywood royalty. He wasn't the son of a superstar whose family tree was guarded more carefully than India's nuclear codes, nor the heir to a production empire funded by mysterious suitcases of cash that arrived faster than film scripts. No, Aatish belonged to Bollywood's awkward middle category—the industry's lower-middle-class nobility. Connected enough to casually drop film names at weddings, but not important enough for anyone to care.

His family occupied that strange no-man's-land of the film industry: too connected to be called outsiders, too unimportant to be insiders. They weren't invited to the big parties, but they definitely knew which hotel the party was happening in and occasionally helped carry the liquor cartons inside.

Aatish's father was the third assistant director to Raj Kapoor, which meant he spent most of his career being ordered around by people who were themselves being ordered around. He was buried somewhere deep in a long chain of assistants—a cinematic footnote remembered only by extremely dedicated film historians and, more importantly, his wife. His actual job involved less "creative vision" and more making sure the *chai* arrived on time, the hero's sunglasses were found, and nobody

accidentally called the star "bhaiya" instead of "sir." According to Aatish, however, this gave his father "direct access to the divine madness of cinema." The rest of the industry called him "the guy who knew where the extension cords were."

Aatish's mother was a junior artist—the kind who laughs at the heroine's terrible jokes as if she just heard the greatest punchline since the invention of language, and spends most of the shoot pretending to sip the same cup of tea in the background for fourteen retakes. According to her, she appeared in nearly fifty films, though her cinematic Everest came when she worked as one of the countless extras in K. Asif's magnum opus Mughal-E-Azam. If you pause the film at exactly the right moment, squint hard enough, and possess the eyesight of a hawk, you may or may not spot her somewhere behind a pillar. But in Kapoor family mythology—carefully written, directed, and overacted by her—she was no ordinary extra. She was the secret link between Salim and Anarkali: the sari-clad courier of love letters, the royal pigeon service without the pigeons. Long before telephones, she claimed she was basically the entire communication department between Salim and Anarkali. Notes travelled through flower baskets, bangles, pallus, and occasionally fruit trays. "Beta," she'd sigh dramatically, "great love stories don't survive on songs alone."

Aatish believed every word. Without his mother, he was convinced the entire romance would've collapsed. Salim would've wandered off to play polo, Anarkali would've joined a tragic poetry club, and Mughal-E-Azam would've ended after

twenty minutes with both of them silently staring at each other from opposite ends of the palace.

As for Akbar, Aatish had absolutely no respect for his so-called greatness. To him, the mighty emperor was just a grumpy father with too much power and way too much free time.

"You've got kingdoms, elephants, jewels, and half the subcontinent," Aatish would scoff. "And THIS is your biggest concern? Your son's girlfriend? Bhai, you're the emperor of India, not the president of the colony gossip committee. Go fight a war, build a monument, do literally anything else."

So in the Kapoor household's version of history, the real tragedy of Mughal-E-Azam wasn't forbidden love or royal politics. It was the fact that Bollywood never properly credited the woman who kept the entire romance alive through flawless saree management and elite-level message delivery.

To young Aatish, his mother wasn't just another extra in the crowd. She was the invisible force holding one of India's greatest love stories together—basically the undercover RAW agent of Mughal romance.

His father would lecture endlessly about how Raj Kapoor convinced Mandakini to do that infamous bathing scene—a scene which, he insisted, was a masterpiece of *cinematic suggestion*, not cheap titillation. Meanwhile, his mother waxed poetic about K. Asif's obsessive madness in creating Mughal-

e-Azam, a process she described as "artistic torment, but with great costumes."

Growing up in this cinema-soaked, slightly delusion-tinged environment, Aatish absorbed Bollywood like a sponge dipped in ghee. Young Aatish, naturally, internalized the drama. He decided that saving doomed romances, raising eyebrows with calculated ambiguity, and generally injecting high-stakes melodrama into everyday life should be his life's calling. After all, what is life but a poorly-scripted, over-budget Bollywood film? He certainly intended to star in his.

Academically, Aatish was... how shall we put it... a prodigy of consistent underachievement. If failure had a national championship, he would have stood on the podium, waving proudly, probably wearing a sash that read "Best Performer in Repeated Attempts." He failed graduation not once, not twice, but three consecutive times. Most people would've taken this as a hint to maybe study, maybe rethink life decisions, maybe at least open the textbook once. But not our Aatish. He believed it was the universe sending him a message. A divine revelation. A cosmic telegram that read: "*Padhai tere bas ki nahi. Camera ke saamne aaja, beta.*"

To him, this wasn't humiliation — this was destiny. According to Aatish, Newton had gravity, Einstein had relativity, and he had... failure. Proof that God wanted him to be a star. Perhaps he would even win India its first Oscar — or at least some award created especially for him, like "Best Eyebrow Expression in a Human Life Form."

Thus began Operation Superstar — his personal mission to conquer Bollywood before Bollywood even knew he existed. He enrolled in acting classes (where he practiced staring intensely at walls), dance classes (where he confused rhythm with earthquake vibrations), and fight choreography (which mostly involved him falling dramatically before the stuntman even touched him). He even learned horse-riding — because obviously every Indian hero must jump off a horse at least once while shouting the heroine's name in slow motion.

He also conducted what he proudly called "test wooings." It's the practice sessions to prepare for the swooning female fans he was convinced awaited him. Flicking his hair like *Shammi Kapoor*, he'd croon a soft, "Hello," in his most seductive tone. The results were consistent: most women ran, a few laughed, and one even fainted—probably from the heat, though Aatish liked to think it was the sheer force of his future heartthrob aura. Most attempts usually failed, but he insisted, it was just a rehearsal for the day when Bombay—and eventually the world—would fall helplessly in love with him.

Still, every night, he looked into the mirror. And the mirror, poor object, too exhausted to argue, simply reflected his delusion back at him. And so he believed. He was the next Rajesh Khanna. Or at least Rajesh Khanna's optimistic cousin.

But reality is a cruel villain with a much better script. Getting a movie role wasn't as simple as walking onto a set and announcing, "*Main tumhara hero hoon*!" He met directors who stared at him like he was a leftover samosa. He auditioned for

producers who were suffering deep existential crises (“Why is life painful?” “What is the meaning of Life?” “Does the Universe have consciousness?” “Why is the heroine insisting on being fully clothed in a bathing scene?” “Why am I even making films?”). Yet, after enough persistence to put mosquitoes to shame, he finally landed a role — in T.K. Basra’s *Dil Ka Dariya.*

The role? The hero's friend. The sidekick. The emotional support of humans. The guy whose job is to clap for the hero, deliver a poorly written comic line, and occasionally die to advance the plot by 0.2%.

The director, a man whose patience was thinner than his hair, explained, "Beta, it's a good role. You even get to cry in one scene."

Aatish absorbed this information. He didn't see an opportunity; he saw an insult. Puffing out his chest, he flicked his hair, looked the director dead in the eye, and delivered a line he’d practiced in the mirror a thousand times, a line made legendary by the great *Dev Anand.*

"I do only lead roles," he declared, his voice a mix of overconfidence and sheer delusion.

Whether it was supreme, reality-defying confidence or the kind of foolishness that makes doctors sigh, no one could tell.

The director’s monocle (he didn't wear one, but the moment demanded it) would have popped out and shattered on the floor. The producer’s heart started writing its own obituary. But then, fate intervened with the most poetic twist.

The hero had to quit the film because of an “accident.”

Officially, it happened while training for a majestic horse-riding sequence.

Unofficially, half the industry swears he simply slipped on the wet bathroom floor like a toddler learning to walk.

But let’s be honest—“Actor Injured in Bathroom” doesn’t sound glamorous. It sounds like something your building watchman whispers while shaking his head sadly. So the PR team quickly upgraded the tragedy: bathroom became horse, slip became fall, and suddenly the man was a warrior who bravely flew off a stallion instead of a guy who lost balance near a bucket.

With the hero gone, the movie got stuck. Producers panicked. The director considered early retirement and selling pav bhaji. And the universe, being the mischievous scriptwriter it is, ensured that every major star was already drowning in their usual 15-film workload. In the 80s, an actor with less than ten movies lined up was considered “between jobs” “resting” or worse, “jobless,” a word that could destroy reputations.

And that’s how destiny, chaos, and one very slippery bathroom conspired to put Aatish in the hero’s seat. Suddenly he wasn’t just lucky—he was bathroom-blessed.

He smirked while signing the contract, whispering like a philosopher who had conquered destiny:

"I do only lead roles."

Dil Ka Dariya released on 12th November,1985— and like all great Indian love stories, it contained poverty, wealth, misunderstandings, rain, and dramatic music that sounded like an orchestra falling down stairs. And Bihar loved it, absolutely loved it. Villagers cried tears that irrigated fields. Chaiwallahs composed poetry. One sided lovers fainted at the emotional climax — probably due to heat, but the timing was impeccable.

A star.

A heartthrob.

A man whose eyebrows could cause national unity was born.

If you notice, most movies in the 80s seemed scientifically designed for frontbenchers — the ones who entered single-screen theatres like it was a wrestling match, armed with whistles, gutka, and an unshakable belief that heroes had no bones, only passion. The stories? Copy-paste. The dialogues? Loud. The emotions? Louder. Only a few directors like Shyam Benegal or Govind Nihalani were politely trying to remind India that movies can have meaning. But India, in return, politely replied, "*Meaning thoda* later. First hero must punch 47 men while adjusting sunglasses."

People say the 80s were the worst phase of Indian cinema. Debatable. Depends on whether you consider logic a crucial component of filmmaking or just an annoying side character.

But there was a reason for this chaos. India, especially the middle class — the primary cinema audience — discovered two life-changing inventions:

Television and VHS.

Suddenly, the middle class didn't have to fight for seats, step on peanut shells, or argue with uncles who smelled of rum and philosophy. They could watch movies at home — in lungi, with chai, and the divine power to rewind fight scenes like gods controlling the universe.

Their philosophy became simple:

"Why pay ₹10 for drama when we can fast-forward tragedy and replay romance?"

They had sophistication, taste, and a remote control. Meanwhile, theatre audiences had faith, stamina, and a strong tolerance for things exploding for no reason. People who could not afford television and VHS found solace in the massy movies that kept logic aside.

This created a cinematic ecosystem where the heroic, melodramatic Aatish Kapoor reigned supreme.

Aatish was the undisputed Sultan of the Front Bench, the Prince of Two-Tier Cities, and the Eyebrow Messiah of the masses. His next few movies were blockbusters in interiors and did moderately well in the metros. His tragedies were so exaggerated that even onions cried while being cut. His heroism was so intense that buildings spontaneously exploded out of respect.

Then came his magnum opus of madness: **Aatank Ka Dushman** — proudly marketed as "India's answer to James Bond," though it felt more like James Bond's rejected cousin.

If Sean Connery walked into a room with the smoothness of a panther dipped in confidence, Aatish Kapoor entered like a man who'd taken a wrong turn, ended up in the janitor's storeroom, and still declared, "This was my plan." He had the swagger of a hero and the geographical awareness of a lost school child on a field trip.

Where Bond sipped martinis with class, Aatish's beverage of choice was cutting chai so potent it could negotiate peace treaties. When Bond said that iconic line — "Bond. James Bond." — Aatish glared at the camera, tilted his chin at a 73-degree dramatic angle and thundered:

"*Kapoor. Aatish Kapoor. Desh ka Dushman chaknachoor!*"

(He insisted the rhyme was God's gift, so he kept the same name in his reel life too.)

Somewhere, Ian Fleming — the creator of James Bond — looked at a world atlas from the heavens, paused at India, and whispered, "Not like this... dear God, not like this."

The spy craft? Less craft, more jugaad. Aatish had a supernatural talent for materializing behind objects that no living being could hide behind. One moment he vanished. The next, he popped out from behind a lamp post thinner than a breadstick. In one scene, he emerged from behind a buffalo. Not beside it — behind it. As if he'd grown there like a vine of

pure testosterone and melodrama. Scientists were approached for answers; scientists resigned.

Then there was his scarf — the hardest-working piece of cloth in cinematic history. It served as a weapon, seatbelt, emotional crutch, boomerang, and once, a parachute. People in theatres began folding their own scarves respectfully, afraid the cloth might file a complaint.

And the villains?

Their moustaches were UNESCO heritage sites. These weren't moustaches; these were ecosystems. You could get lost in there and discover a new species of squirrel. Some audience members swore they saw lost keys, missing voters' IDs, and and—most convincingly—their local MLA, who surfaces only once every five years, waving vaguely before disappearing back into the foliage.

The fight scenes unfolded with such painstaking slowness that time itself went on strike. One punch took so long that harvest seasons changed. Babies were born, grew up, and applied for engineering entrance exams during a single dramatic fall.

This wasn't espionage.

This was mythological chaos conducted with eyebrow aerobics and chest-beating patriotism.

In this madness, Aatish Kapoor achieved something Bond never could:

He became a legend not because he made sense — but because he made nonsense look inevitable.

And then the film released — not released, detonated — across Bihar and UP.

In metros, critics adjusted their spectacles, mumbling things like "lack of narrative cohesion" and "screenplay deficiencies." Meanwhile in Bihar and UP, people entered theatres like they were entering a temple. They didn't come to analyze. They came to FEEL.

In Patna, whistles replaced oxygen.

In Gorakhpur, front benches had to be reinforced because grown men were slapping them in joy like devotional drums. The demand for the red pants he wore throughout the movie exploded so wildly that tailors began stitching like they were competing in the Olympics. Entire markets turned into red-pant festivals. One tailor reportedly stitched 47 pairs in a day before fainting heroically onto a pile of polyester, whispering, "*Aatish ji... humse na hoga...*"

Mobs stormed shops asking for "*Aatish-cut laal pants*," and when a shop ran out, men walked home in fiery red curtains—because missing the look was not an option.In Ballia, someone fired bullets in the air during a dialogue — not out of anger but sheer cinematic patriotism. The police officer didn't arrest him; he simply asked for the dialogue timing so he could cheer at the right moment in the next show.

Queues outside single screens stretched longer than election lines. People came on tractors, bikes, cycles, trolleys, and sometimes on foot after walking ten kilometers refusing to miss the show even if they had to sit on the floor, balcony edges, projector room, or hanging from the ceiling fan like committed acrobats of devotion.

And through it all, Aatish Kapoor — India's most confident, least qualified spy — stood tall, chest out, scarf fluttering like national pride.

James Bond had style but Aatish Kapoor had UP-Bihar mass hysteria, which is a much more dangerous weapon.

In one theatre in Muzaffarpur, the projector reportedly broke, but the audience re-enacted the movie from memory — each person taking turns to play Aatish, villains, buffalo, and occasionally the scarf.

Chai stalls near the cinema halls began advertising themselves as "Official Aatish Tea Stall" making tea so strong that by the third sip, even the calmest man felt like he could deliver a monologue about revenge, destiny, and the betrayal of moustache-bearing villains.

Barbers were flooded with demands for the Aatish haircut, a hairstyle that wasn't cut so much as it was unleashed. Tailors worked overtime making red pants at a rate that threatened textile economics. One tailor in Buxar claimed he saw Aatish in a dream guiding him on the correct pleat alignment for optimum heroism.

And thus, while big city critics wrote long essays nobody read, the people of Bihar and UP wrote their review in five unstoppable words:

"*Bhai, picture garda udaa diya.*"

Aatank Ka Dushman wasn't just a film there.

It was a festival, a movement, a lifestyle.

A celebration of emotion so loud that even logic quietly packed its bags and left the region until the film's run ended.

And in that roaring chaos, Aatish Kapoor didn't just become a star —he became folklore.

But by the late 80s and early 90s, Bollywood began to mutate in ways that made Aatish Kapoor's red pants, death-defying scarf, and tragic eyebrow aerobics feel... almost prehistoric. Evolution was crueler than any villain he'd ever punched in slow motion.

A new breed of heroes had arrived — chocolaty, soft-spoken, floppy-haired lover boys like Aamir Khan and Salman Khan. Men who could smile like a toothpaste commercial on divine commission. Men who could hold a rose without looking like they were about to interrogate it for national security reasons. Men whose biggest stunt was eye contact.

Poor Aatish Kapoor watched in horror as heroines started choosing men with dimples over men with overcharged testosterone. Directors who once begged him to punch a helicopter were now politely asking if he could "maybe cry a

little." Cry? Aatish Kapoor? The man whose idea of emotional range was switching from left eyebrow raise to right eyebrow raise?

Bollywood has changed.

Aatish hadn't.

Suddenly, the world wanted heartthrobs who whispered sweet nothings, not heroes who screamed patriotic monologues loud enough to scare buffaloes into early migration. The audience now craved romance... not men who wrestled floods, punched goats (with consent), and fought moustache-twisting villains all in one scene before lunch.

Aatish, of course, was confident. "It's just a fucking passing phase," he declared to the mirror while practicing a slow-motion glare. "People will come back. They'll realize that chest-thumping and melodrama are eternal." He didn't realize that the "people" he referred to were armed with VHS tapes, college degrees, and a newfound sense of cinematic taste.

The middle-class audience had started returning to theatres, now with the swagger of cinephiles. They wanted college romance, tearful misunderstandings, soft lighting, and songs choreographed to look like poetry. Aatish's brand of rustic, earthy, front-bench melodrama — the kind that made peasants faint and goats swoon — suddenly seemed like a historical artifact, preserved only for those who still believed that emotional trauma could be measured in decibels.

Producers tried to adapt, but it was tricky. “Aatish Kapoor appeals to loyalists in Bihar and UP,” they explained. “But we need the urban crowd too.” Aatish nodded, trying to look confident, while secretly imagining a VHS tape being rewound in the hands of some young college student, mocking his heroic eyebrow.

And so, tragedy met comedy. The man who had once been a demigod of melodrama, the king of red pants, now stood at the gates of a new era — a world of soft smiles, gentle dialogues, and romantically plausible plots. He was still heroic, still tragic, still eyebrow-perfect... but in the eyes of the VHS-equipped youth, he was slowly turning into a relic: the rustic superhero who wrestled lions in red pants, now outshone by boys who could smile while holding a coffee cup.

Aatish shrugged, lifted his tragic eyebrow, and whispered to no one in particular:

"Every era has its heroes. Maybe I am just... vintage."

Year-1993: Once the poster boy of 80s melodrama, Aatish who turned 41 last month has just delivered two consecutive cinematic disasters. Aatish still shuddered when anyone mentioned his last two releases — cinematic disasters so profound that even Doordarshan wouldn’t rerun them out of pity.

The first was *Ghar Ek Mandir,* a family drama that was supposed to melt hearts but ended up evaporating audience patience instead. Legend has it, Rajshri Productions secretly

thanked Aatish for this one — it apparently taught them how not to make family films. After watching *Ghar Ek Mandir*, even families started fighting during intermission. The film was meant to celebrate the Indian family, but the only thing it united was critics — in collective mockery. The producer reportedly aged ten years between the premiere and the first Monday, and his wife was seen outside Siddhivinayak Temple praying for divine forgiveness for funding it.

Then came *Janam Janam Tere Liye*, Aatish's "magnum opus" — a reincarnation revenge saga "inspired" by **Karz.** Inspired being the polite word. The problem was that the revenge took so long to come that the audience achieved enlightenment halfway through. The plot promised rebirth, but what really needed reincarnation was the box office collection. As one witty critic wrote, "The producers may have to take another birth to recover their investment."

After these two spectacular flops, Aatish was convinced the gods of cinema were testing him — or maybe just trolling him. And yet, the undying optimist in him (or perhaps the fool) believed that his next film*, Jeene Nahi Dunga*, a dacoit revenge action movie would make everything right again. After all, third time's the charm — though for Aatish, it often felt like third time's the obituary.

The evening before the premiere of *Jeene Nahi Dunga*, Aatish Kapoor's last hope at cinematic redemption, his car crawled through the narrow lanes of Bandra like a tired elephant in a parade no one cared to watch. The posters of his upcoming

movie flapped limply on walls — sun-bleached faces of him holding a gun, glaring at nothing in particular — as if the city itself had already moved on.

He stopped before a modest apartment building with peeling paint and a flickering tube light that buzzed louder than most of his dialogues. Parking his car, he took a deep breath — the kind taken not out of hope, but habit. He lit a cigarette, looked up at the second-floor balcony where a faint yellow light glowed, and muttered to himself, "*Jeene Nahi Dunga... bas yeh film jee jaaye.*"

He climbed the narrow stairs slowly, each creaking step echoing like a countdown to either resurrection or oblivion. Before the world judged him tomorrow, he needed to be with someone who didn't — or at least pretended not to.

Behind the faded blue door of that apartment lived Anishka — the only person who still looked at him not as a fading hero, but as a man trying desperately not to fade. Anishka, in her late 20s was, by any measure, beautiful — the kind of beauty that seemed effortless, yet carried a quiet melancholy. Her hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders, her eyes dark and luminous, hinting at a life lived both in dreams and in disappointments. There was a grace to the way she moved, a subtle elegance that didn't need the glitz of a film set to announce itself. She had the presence of someone who had seen both the glitter and the grind of Bombay, and survived it — or at least survived it enough to keep walking forward.

Anishka, a struggling actress or at least what she believes, came to Bombay from Delhi around five years ago like any other young girl with dreams in her eyes. From the very first day, Anishka was in love — not with a person, but with the silver screen. As a child in Delhi, she would sit for hours in front of television, mesmerized by the shimmer of celluloid, the glint of sequins, the way heroes held hearts in one hand and guns in the other. Glamour became a religion, and she is its most devout follower. When she finally declared to her family that she was leaving for Bombay to become an actress, her father's fury was instantaneous, volcanic, absolute.

"You are a disgrace!" he yelled, grabbing her suitcase as if it contained nuclear secrets. "Step out of this house and do not come back! Your influence alone is enough to ruin your sister's marriage prospects. Consider yourself dead to this family!" And with that, the moment she set foot on the steps outside their home, she was officially disowned. Her mother, trembling in silence, whispered farewells from the shadowed doorway. Her younger sister's future, her family's honor, her own dreams — all intertwined, all shattered in one excruciating instant.

Bombay, glittering and chaotic, offered no miracles. The city devoured dreamers like a hungry machine. Survival was harsh, especially for a girl who arrived with hope but no connections. Anishka scavenged small, forgettable roles — running across backgrounds, pretending to faint in hallways, occasionally appearing as "the girl who almost matters." She acted in low-budget, B-grade films like *Daku Ramkali* and *Kabristaan ka*

Darwaja. Instead of catapulting her to fame, these films branded her as disposable, unsuitable for big-budget ventures. But with rent, food, and survival to consider, she had no choice. The city was expensive; dreams, even more so.

Anishka first met Aatish Kapoor on the set of a forgettable action film where he was playing an honest police officer and she was Extra No. 27 in a crowded marketplace scene.

The shooting had already fallen behind schedule, which meant the assistant director was in the sort of mood usually reserved for tax raids and dental surgery. When Anishka missed her cue for the second time, he exploded.

"How difficult is it to walk from one end of the set to the other?" he barked. "You're not performing brain surgery!"

The entire set fell silent. A few crew members pretended to be busy. Others watched with the detached curiosity of people grateful that someone else was being shouted at.

Anishka stood there quietly, clutching her dupatta. She tried to apologize, but the words got stuck somewhere between her throat and her pride. Aatish, waiting nearby for his next shot, noticed the glimmer of tears forming in her eyes.

Perhaps it was her innocence. Perhaps it was the way she seemed completely out of place amidst the noise and chaos of a film set. Or perhaps Aatish simply recognized the look of someone whose dreams were being chipped away one humiliation at a time. Whatever the reason, something made him pay attention.

He strolled over with the leisurely confidence of a man whose face occupied most of the film's posters.

"Relax," he told the assistant director. "She's an extra, not a trained commando. Give her a minute."

The assistant director immediately softened his tone. In Bollywood, rank determined volume.

Anishka looked up and mumbled a thank you.

Aatish nodded as if he had just negotiated a peace treaty between rival nations.

It was a small moment, barely noticed by anyone else on set. But for Anishka, it was the first time someone important had treated her as though she mattered. And for Aatish, it was the first time he noticed the young woman who would eventually become an important part of his life.

In the days that followed, their worlds began to intertwine. They started talking during the shoot. They even started meeting outside but it was not dating in its typical sense. It's just two lonely souls sharing some moments. Anishka used to share her room with another girl and now she is getting married and moving out. Anishka couldn't afford the flat on her own.

Suddenly, even that fragile arrangement was disappearing. There was no family she could call, no safety net waiting to catch her.

Aatish saw the worry she tried so hard to hide. Without making a spectacle of it, he rented her a modest apartment in Bandra. Nothing extravagant—just a place where she could close the door and know she belonged somewhere. Every now and then, he would leave a little money with her, disguised as an advance, a favor, an afterthought. The amounts were small enough to preserve her dignity, yet large enough to make the difference between getting by and falling apart.

Their meetings became a quiet habit. He would drop by unannounced. She would make tea. They would talk for hours or sit together saying very little at all. There was an ease between them that neither fully understood. It felt less like a romance and more like two wounded travelers sharing shelter from the same storm, unaware that, somewhere along the way, they had begun to become each other's home.

Anishka, bruised by disappointment but stubbornly clinging to her dreams, often wondered if he truly cared or if she was merely another role in his elaborate performance. Aatish, for his part, never intended to exploit her; the apartment, the food, the company — all were quietly offered, without drama, without headline-making gestures.

Their connection was strange, absurd, slightly macabre, yet profoundly tender. In a city that measured affection in contracts and survival in compromise, the small moments they shared — a cup of tea, a laugh, a glance across the room — became sanctuary. In each other, they found warmth, companionship, and an honesty the world outside refused to

grant. In Bombay's chaos, their fragile flame flickered defiantly, a small rebellion against the darkness.

Aatish knocked the door of the apartment. Anishka opened to door with a gentle smile on her face. Aatish stepped in, his presence filling the small apartment without effort. He didn't need to announce himself; he was both here and elsewhere, like a ghost of the city's past, carrying the weight of his own faded stardom with certain nonchalance.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," he said lightly, shrugging off his jacket and hanging it on a hook by the door. His voice, calm and measured, had that peculiar quality of being both intimate and distant at once.

"Not at all," Anishka replied, stepping aside. She moved with a grace that was almost casual, though every movement was precise, deliberate, as if choreographed by her own survival instincts. "I was just making some tea."

Her apartment, by contrast, was modest but radiated a lived-in charm. The living room was compact, the walls painted a soft cream that had faded over time, giving the space a quiet patina. A tiny balcony overlooked the street, littered with potted plants that struggled heroically against the smog and dust, their leaves reaching desperately for the sun. Books were stacked haphazardly in corners — a mixture of novels, scripts, and dog-eared magazines — while a small, well-used sofa bore the indentations of countless solitary evenings. It was cozy, intimate, a space that seemed to have absorbed both her laughter and her tears over the years. Their relationship existed

in the liminal space between affection and necessity, a strange equilibrium that neither of them felt the need to define.

When they were together, the world outside seemed to pause. Aatish could sip his scotch in peace while she moved around the kitchen, humming softly, chopping vegetables with the kind of focus that made everything else fade away. Sometimes, she would sit across from him, tossing a stray lock of hair behind her ear, and they would talk — about dreams, failures, fears, the absurdity of the film industry, or nothing at all.

It was never clear what exactly tied Aatish and Anishka together — love, convenience, loneliness, or perhaps just the quiet understanding of two wounded souls who had stopped expecting miracles from life. Maybe Aatish never truly loved her, and maybe Anishka stayed only because the rent was paid on time. But in Bombay, where everyone was selling something — dreams, faces, names — honesty of any kind was a rare luxury.

Their relationship didn't fit into the tidy boxes that society loved to label. There were no promises, no grand declarations, no future plans drawn in the air. What existed between them was something softer, quieter — a companionship born out of exhaustion, sustained by need, and unexpectedly laced with affection.

For Aatish, whose life revolved around pretending — smiling for cameras, flattering producers, and performing emotions that weren't his own — Anishka's tiny Bandra apartment was

a rare escape from the constant theatre of his existence. It was here, among peeling paint and the faint smell of jasmine oil, that he could finally stop acting. When he lay beside her, his head resting on her lap, the chaos outside seemed to fade. In the warmth of her embrace, he found something he hadn't felt in years — peace, or something close to it.

For Anishka, Aatish wasn't a hero from the posters, but a man — flawed, weary, human. He brought with him a sense of security in a city that showed no mercy to women who dared to dream. The apartment, with its flickering tube light and perpetually half-broken fan, was the only place that felt remotely like home.

Together, they found comfort — not in love's grand gestures, but in its simplest form. Two people, both a little broken, finding in each other what the world had long denied them — warmth, care, and the illusion, however fleeting, that they still mattered.

Was there love here? Perhaps. Or perhaps it was simply convenience wrapped in tenderness. Aatish needed her presence to feel grounded, a rare touch of normalcy in a life built on illusion. Anishka needed him to survive Bombay, to pay the rent that kept her off the streets, and to provide a small pocket of security in a city that had chewed her up and spat her out.

Yet in these quiet moments, all pretense fell away. They were two human beings, fragile and raw, holding onto each other in the way people do when the world is cruel, absurd, and utterly

indifferent. And for a few stolen hours, in that small Bandra apartment, they found solace — tender, imperfect, and completely their own.

Aatish sank into the old, sunken sofa — the kind that had probably been rejected by three tenants before finding refuge in Anishka's apartment — and exhaled. The day had been long, the kind of day that made even a star question his own reflection. He reached for the bottle of his favourite Scotch, the only luxury he allowed himself without guilt. The amber liquid glimmered in the half-light as he poured it into a glass, the clink of ice the only sound in the quiet room.

From the small kitchen came the rhythmic sounds of plates and the faint hiss of oil. Anishka emerged, wiping her hands on her faded dupatta, carrying a plate of chicken tikka. "It's your favourite," she said softly, placing it before him with a shy smile. "Made it just the way you like."

Aatish took a bite, then another. He didn't say much — words often betrayed him — but his eyes met hers and lingered for a moment. That silent nod was enough. Anishka understood. Between them, conversations were rarely loud or elaborate; glances did most of the talking.

Contrary to what the tabloids printed and his fans imagined, Aatish Kapoor wasn't the flamboyant star when he was here. He wasn't the man who commanded attention on set or strutted through film parties. Here, he was quiet, almost fragile — just a man who liked his drink and her company.

For Anishka, this silence was precious. She knew there was no marriage waiting at the end of their story, no promises, no forever. But she didn't ask for any. Whatever Aatish gave — the small gestures, the warmth, the company — it was enough.

And for Aatish, she wasn't a fling or a secret to be hidden, though she remained one. With Anishka, he didn't need to perform. Theirs wasn't a love defined by passion or permanence, but by comfort — two lonely souls finding a brief sanctuary in each other. In a city where everything was loud, fake, and fleeting, their quiet companionship was perhaps the most real thing either of them had.

Aatish sat slouched on the worn sofa, swirling the remnants of scotch in his glass. The amber liquid did little to calm the storm in his mind. "Two flops back to back," he muttered, voice heavy with disbelief. "*Ghar Mera Mandir, Janam Janam Tere Liye...* I feel like I've been erased from every marquee in Bihar and UP. Even my loyal audience... they've turned their backs."

Anishka sat beside him, her presence steady, almost maternal in its calmness. She rested a hand lightly on his shoulder. "At least," she said softly, "you're still a lead actor. You're still the one they put at the centre of the posters. Me? I've done a few small roles, two B-grade movies — that's it. And what did I get for leaving my home, for losing my family? Nothing. I paid the price, and the world didn't care."

A flicker of pain crossed her face as memories surfaced. "I remember, as a child, my father would go to extreme lengths over a mild fever. And my mother... she would fuss, scold, hug,

feed me soup that tasted like love itself. And my sister — oh, the endless banter. I miss it all. I paid so much to come here, and for what? Just survival, just scraps."

Aatish let the words sink in, finding a strange comfort in her honesty. "Sometimes I hate that I can't make this... us... public. The fans, the press... it's like living half a life."

Anishka's lips curved into a small, knowing smile. "I don't expect anything from anyone. The world hardened me a long time ago. I have no complaints with you. All I have is this place — this apartment, this stolen corner of normalcy. And you," she added, gently, "you give me that. That's enough."

He reached for her hand, letting the tension of the day flow away. In her presence, the failures, the flops, the relentless machinery of Bollywood all faded, if only for a moment. They didn't need grand gestures, public declarations, or glamorous premieres. Here, in this small, rented apartment, amidst the city's chaos, they were just two fragile humans, tender and exposed, seeking solace in one another.

Aatish felt the weight in his chest ease, just slightly, just enough to remind him that he was not entirely alone. Slowly, deliberately, he leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. The gesture was tender, reverent, a small offering of gratitude for the courage she gave him simply by being there. He smiled — not the public, camera-ready grin he wore for the world, but a soft, private smile, fragile as a candle flame.

"Thank you," he murmured. "For being... here."

She lifted her head slightly, looking into his eyes, seeing through the carefully maintained heroism, seeing the man beneath. Her smile was warm, quiet, unwavering. “Always,” she said simply.

There was tragedy etched in both their lives, a subtle, quiet sorrow that neither could fully erase. Aatish carried the burden of a fading career, the pressure of a public image that demanded he be larger than life while his private life teetered on uncertainty. Anishka bore the scars of abandoned dreams, of choices made at high cost, of a city that offered opportunity only if one was willing to gamble everything. Yet in this tiny room, with the scent of old books, the fading afternoon light streaming through the balcony, and the quiet hum of Bombay outside, the tragedy became almost bearable.

They clung to one another not out of need alone, but because in each other, they found understanding. There was no judgment, no performance, only the raw acknowledgment of lives lived hard and yet persevering. Aatish felt a warmth in that closeness that was rare and irreplaceable, and Anishka felt the quiet strength of being seen, truly seen, for the first time in years.

They stayed that way for a long moment, hand in hand, heads leaning together, the world outside continuing its relentless pace while they existed in the rare and fragile pause between heartbeats. And for that moment, the tragedy of their pasts, the uncertainty of their futures, the weight of their fears — all of it softened, replaced by the undeniable comfort of

shared presence, of tenderness unspoken but deeply understood.

For once, it wasn't tragedy. It was survival. And for now, that was more than enough.

Aatish swirled the last of his whiskey, savouring the burn before setting the glass down with a soft clink. He straightened his jacket, adjusted his cufflinks, and ran a hand through his hair, the practiced movements of a man who had to look flawless while the storm of doubt raged quietly beneath. Today is the premier of his movie *Jeene Nahi Dunga* and this premier in a way will decide the course of his career.

Anishka sat on the edge of the sofa, silent but steady, watching him. "Good luck," she said softly, her voice almost swallowed by the dim hum of the apartment. "You'll shine... you always do."

He glanced at her, a flicker of longing in his eyes, and she understood. He couldn't take her with him tonight — not to the cameras, not to the flashing bulbs, not to the world waiting to judge. The words weren't spoken, but the truth hung between them, heavy and unyielding.

He bent slightly, brushing a strand of hair from her temple, and she reached up, holding his hand for a heartbeat longer than necessary. "It's okay," she whispered. "You've already given me more than most could ever give. That's enough."

A faint smile curved his lips, private and fleeting. He pressed his forehead to hers, a soft, almost imperceptible kiss lingering

in the quiet. Then, with a final glance, he stepped toward the door.

"Go," she said softly. "Be the man everyone expects. I'll be here... when it's over."

He nodded once, his hand brushing briefly against hers in silent gratitude, and left. The click of the door echoed behind him, leaving the apartment filled with shadows and silence.

Anishka exhaled slowly, a quiet ache settling in her chest. She reached into her bag, pulling out a cigarette, lighting it with a careful flick of her lighter. The smoke curled upward, mingling with the dim glow of the room, wrapping around her like a small, private companion. She inhaled deeply, letting the burn ground her, a tiny ritual of calm in the wake of his absence.

Alone, she sat back against the sofa, watching the smoke drift lazily toward the ceiling. Outside, Bombay glittered and roared, indifferent and relentless, but here — in the faint glow, in the lingering scent of him, in the curling wisps of smoke — their world, hidden and fragile, still existed.

And for tonight, that had to be enough.

The Premier Night

Aatish Kapoor rolled up to the theatre in a car that looked like it had been designed by someone who'd binge-watched too many 90s music videos—shiny, overdecorated, and deeply unsure whether it was a vehicle or a travelling vanity mirror. He stepped out, hair sculpted with the kind of precision that

suggested a personal treaty had been signed between him and his hairstylist: touch the gel and face consequences.

The paparazzi pounced. Flashes burst like Diwali crackers on discount. Aatish gave them a flourish of a wave so dramatic it could have been an audition for a shampoo commercial. His expression screamed, "Yes, I am here. And yes, my grooming budget could fund a small village."

Inside, the red carpet smelled of cheap perfume, stress, and pure, undiluted ambition—a fragrance collection no brand would dare release. Aatish strutted in like a man who had survived unemployment, mediocrity, and at least three catastrophic hair experiments, all in one lifetime.

He took his seat in the front row. The director was already practically vibrating in excitement, grinning like a man who had just discovered both fire and acting theory simultaneously. "Aatish," he whispered, leaning in, "this... this is the next *Sholay.* I can feel it in my spine. Or maybe that's the gas from lunch, but I choose to believe it's genius."

Next to him, the producer, a rotund man with the aura of someone who had wrestled *laddoos* for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, nodded solemnly. He owned a chain of sweet shops in Indore, and like every Indian child who ever watched a Bollywood film, he had once dreamed of being on the silver screen. As a boy, he had imagined himself romancing leading ladies, delivering dialogues with perfect pauses, and dancing through song sequences while life slowed in melodramatic close-ups.

Enter the director, a master of persuasion and cinematic philosophy. "Sir," he said, "in Bollywood, producers carry more respect than actors. They are gods. The actors bow to them. As a producer you can make or break careers while sitting in a chair more comfortable than any hero's bed in a romantic montage!"

And just like that, the sweet-shop mogul found a loophole in life: he could still be the emperor of Bollywood, just not the face on the posters. He poured everything he could into *Jeene Nahi Dunga*, imagining himself orchestrating a film that would make the world tremble, actors queue outside his office, and critics write sonnets in his honour. In his mind, this was his **Mughal-e-Azam**, and the cinema hall was his empire.

The critics, scattered in their armchairs like sceptical owls, whispered with polite suspicion only free food and air-conditioning could inspire. The lights dimmed. The director leaned toward Aatish, eyes gleaming. "Every frame is revolutionary. Every line of dialogue—revolutionary poetry. They won't see it coming!"

The producer, meanwhile, practiced his dramatic clapping: slow, then fast, then weep into my handkerchief like a man who's just eaten too many *laddoos.*

Aatish caught the eye of a critic three rows back. Her expression screamed, 'I'm only here for the AC and popcorn'. He nodded in solidarity, silently agreeing that survival tonight would require both courage and a strong sense of irony.

And then, like the opening salvo of a cinematic sugar rush, the first credits rolled. The theatre collectively held its breath—or maybe it was just indigestion from overpriced samosas. Either way, *Jeene Nahi Dunga* was about to live or die in the most gloriously ridiculous way possible.

The film unfolded with the confidence of a man sprinting across a minefield while insisting he had everything under control. The plot changed direction so often that even the GPS would have eventually given up and asked to be dropped home. Characters appeared, disappeared, and reappeared with new hairstyles and unexplained motivations, as though the screenplay had been assembled during a power outage. At one point, a critic in the front row was seen furiously taking notes before quietly closing his notebook and staring into the middle distance like a war veteran reliving old trauma. Another reportedly whispered, "This isn't a film review anymore. This is a hostage negotiation." One muttered, "If this is the new Sholay, I'd rather watch my ceiling fan wobble dangerously. At least that has suspense." Another tapped her pen against her notebook, as if sheer force could summon better dialogue from the screen.

By the interval, Aatish had stopped wondering whether the audience liked the movie and had moved on to calculating how difficult it would be to legally change his name.

The lights came up, and the credits rolled like a never-ending train of glory—or at least in the producer's mind. Aatish sat slumped in his seat, the faint glow of the screen still reflecting

off his meticulously gelled hair. Somewhere between the villain juggling kittens and the hero surviving a rooftop explosion while delivering his emotional monologue, Aatish had realized a hard truth: this was far from the comeback he had imagined.

Beside him, the director was practically vibrating in his seat, eyes wide with unshakable conviction. "Did you see the subtle symbolism in the opening fight scene? And the emotional resonance when he tripped on the stairs? People won't understand yet, but history will remember. This... is another *Sholay*!" He nodded vigorously at Aatish, who considered nodding back just to avoid a minor existential crisis.

The producer, on the other hand, was caught in a very different kind of mental gymnastics. He tugged nervously at his collar and whispered to no one in particular, "Maybe I'm too naive to understand good cinema... or... maybe... maybe the movie is actually... bad?" His voice trailed off, drowned in the mental echo of ten years of dreams, sugar-coated fantasies, and two dozen sweets he hadn't eaten.

Around them, the critics began assembling like a pack of highly caffeinated wolves. One adjusted her glasses, scribbling with the ferocity of someone trying to exorcise all traces of cinematic absurdity. Another muttered, "I've seen kindergarten plays with more narrative cohesion... and slightly fewer explosions." They were ready—sharp pens poised to eviscerate every frame, every dialogue, every improbable stunt.

Meanwhile, the handful of audience members who had actually managed to sleep during the film stirred, blinking

groggily at the harsh overhead lights. Their dreams had been mercifully free of emotional rooftop flips and villain-kitten subplots, but reality was unforgiving. "Aw... we have to leave?" one groaned, realizing they were about to abandon the blessed AC sanctuary of the theatre. A collective sigh rose, a chorus of indignation at the cruel cruelty of returning to the sweltering city outside.

The director, oblivious to Aatish's disappointment, leaned closer to the producer. "Do you see it? The genius! The layers! The nuanced performances!"

The producer nodded shakily, still trying to parse whether genius required self-delusion or sheer blindness. "Yes... yes, of course," he stammered. "Absolutely... if you say so... I'm sure..." He clutched a handkerchief, muttering, "Maybe I should stick to sweets. At least sugar is not so delusional. It knows it job.

Aatish finally gave in to reality, leaning back and muttering under his breath, "This is... not the comeback I dreamed of. More like... a warm-up exercise in public humiliation."

The critics sharpened their teeth for the opening salvo, the producer wavered on the thin line between delusion and disappointment, and the audience shuffled toward the exits like survivors of a cinematic storm. And somewhere, in the chaos of it all, the director continued to whisper about *Sholay,* symbolism, and revolutionary storytelling, utterly convinced that the world was simply not ready for his genius.

Outside the theatre, the night waited—hot, humid, and merciless—while inside, *Jeene Nahi Dunga* had accomplished its true legacy: it left everyone slightly confused, mildly traumatized, and entirely entertained in ways they hadn't signed up for.

The moment the film ended, Aatish Kapoor knew the verdict — not from the audience, but from the silence. Not angry silence. Not disappointed silence. But the kind of silence where people look at each other as if trying to politely confirm whether the suffering is now officially over. A dignified, socially responsible silence. The silence of decent citizens who will not boo, but will also never speak of this night again.

While walking out, a few people nodded to each other in slow sympathy. Some stretched their backs like they had survived captivity. One elderly gentleman stood and whispered to his wife: Next time, we're watching wildlife documentaries. At least when they're bad, the animals don't overact."

Aatish did not wait for the press. He saw them forming at the exit — gelled hair journalists with half-broken tape recorders, critics with their notebooks open like autopsy sheets. He slipped out through the side door — a fire escape smelling of paint and rat poison — and did not look back.

Let the director handle it. The man still believed he had made another *Sholay.* At the after-party stage, he was already explaining "symbolism" to a journalist who only asked whether the film had a second half.

Aatish had no intention of being present when reality arrived like a speeding truck.

He reached his car, slid in, shut the door, and finally exhaled the way a man exhales after holding his breath inside a collapsing building. He lit a cigarette with hands that were shaking. He took a long drag.

Then he drove.

He did not look at billboards. He did not look at posters. He did not look at himself in the mirror. He drove through Bombay traffic like a ghost with a learner's license — unbothered by signals, rules, or possibly his own pulse.

When he reached the building of his apartment, the night guard gave him a salute so sympathetic that it physically hurt.

Inside, *Babloo*, his manager was waiting.

Babloo was Aatish's companion almost throughout his career. Babloo always waited.

How Babloo Happened

Babloo's real name was Babban Rao Thakur — a name so grand it sounded like someone who rode horses, owned land, or had at least slapped a British officer at some point. But Babban Rao Thakur was born with the destiny of a man who always ends up holding the bags, the wallets, the umbrellas, the emotional breakdowns.

When Aatish had gotten his very first movie role, his father — a man of simple sense and powerful opinions — told him:

“Beta, real heroes have managers. Even if you have nothing to manage, you must have someone managing it.”

Aatish had protested.

His father had refused to budge.

So they made a list of “suitable candidates” from their tiny neighbourhood— all three of them. One had run off to the Gulf, chasing dreams and leaving his debts behind. Another had become a bus conductor, proudly wielding a whistle like a scepter. And the third was Babban Rao Thakur, working at a medical shop, whose greatest talent was writing “PAID” on bills in handwriting that could make a calligrapher weep with envy.

Aatish’s father introduced him with the solemnity of presenting a royal advisor. Babban was promptly chosen—not because he was talented, or clever, or even vaguely useful, but because the other two didn’t bother to show up.

“This is Babban. He will handle your work.”

Which sounded impressive... until you remembered that Aatish didn’t really have much work to handle yet. But Babban took the role very seriously. On the first day of being “manager,” he polished Aatish’s shoes, ironed his shirt while he was wearing it, and introduced himself on set as:

“I am Babban Rao Thakur, Manager and Right Hand of Hero Saab.”

Someone laughed.

Someone else said Babban was too heavy a name for someone who walked like a man avoiding puddles.

And just like that — without ceremony — Babban Rao Thakur became Babloo.

He never objected.

He belonged to the name instantly.

And he stayed.

Through the struggle years.

Through the his blockbusters.

Through superstardom.

Through the first decline.

And now — through the silence.

Aatish entered the apartment. Babloo stood up immediately.

"You didn't stay for the press?" Babloo asked gently.

Aatish laughed the way one laughs after stepping on a nail.

"Let the fucking director answer questions. He is still explaining the climax to people who only wanted to know will they get charged for the popcorn they ate during the premiere show?"

Babloo nodded. He said nothing else.

Aatish walked to the minibar — the fake globe, the symbol of international delusion. He opened a bottle and poured whisky with the grace of a man performing last rites.

"Roll one," he said.

Babloo sat cross-legged on the carpet and rolled a joint with the precision of a jeweler fitting diamonds.

They smoked up.

Slowly, the air softened. The room loosened.

Aatish leaned back, head against the sofa, staring at the ceiling fan as if waiting for it to reveal answers.

"You remember," he began, voice thick and slow, "when theaters used to roar?"

Babloo nodded.

"When my entry shot could raise the fucking dead?"

A faint smile.

"And now? Today I saw a man yawn during the fight scene. Yawn, Babloo. During the fight. I was breaking bones and he was deciding if he should go home early."

He laughed — a small, cracked thing.

"You know what's fucking worse, Babloo? They didn't fucking hate it. Hate is passion. Hate is fire. Hate is at least having an opinion. They just... had no damn opinion. I used to be a festival. Now I'm the fucking background noise."

Babloo listened the way only someone who has seen all versions of a man can.

Aatish rubbed his face.

"Stardom is like standing on a balcony," he murmured. "You feel wind, applause, cameras… but the balcony is high. And when you fall… there's no fucking railing."

He finished his drink.

Then he sat up — not defeated, but gathering himself.

"This is not the end," he said quietly.

Babloo nodded.

"Tomorrow," Aatish whispered, "we try again."

Because in Bombay, failure is not death.

Failure is only intermission.

Next morning Aatish sat slumped in his apartment, flipping through newspapers like a man discovering the truth too late. The headlines were brutal:

"*Jeene Nahi Dunga*: A Masterclass in Confusion"

"Explosions Everywhere, Sense Nowhere"

"Even Bihar Has Moved On—And That's Saying Something"

By the first week itself, it was painfully clear: **Jeene Nahi Dunga** had flopped spectacularly. Not just in Mumbai, not just in the metros—but even in Bihar, a land famously loyal to melodrama, where the worst of Aatish Kapoor's previous

disasters had run for weeks like religious festivals. And yet here, the hero juggling kittens mid-explosion, reciting dialogues that sounded like slightly confused poetry, had been rejected with shocking unanimity.

The irony was deliciously cruel. For decades, the Aatish Kapoor brand had meant: dacoits, melodrama, tragic romance, and occasionally a staircase misstep that turned into heroism. But now, post-liberalisation, the audience had glimpsed the wider world. Satellite TV had arrived like a tsunami of taste and exposure. Hollywood action, European thrillers, Japanese suspense—viewers realized that maybe explosions didn't need poetry, dacoits didn't need slow-motion stares, and villains could look stylish without juggling kittens.

In Bihar, people whispered: "Dacoits are passè. Underworld dons with leather jackets and sunglasses? That's the new sexy!" The rustic hero dragging his moustache across melodramatic monologues was no longer inspiring awe. He inspired yawns. Aatish's cinematic arsenal, once potent enough to summon tears and admiration from every village and city, now seemed quaint, like a VHS tape of Sholay played backward.

The Bihar box-office report lay on the coffee table. Zero weeks running. Barely enough tickets sold to cover the theatre's air-conditioning bill. Aatish stared at it as if it were a mirror reflecting the ruins of his dreams. "Even my worst movies ran here for weeks," he muttered. "And this... this got buried like a fucking treasure no one wanted."

He turned on the television. Hollywood films streamed effortlessly: sleek, stylish, explosions everywhere—but nobody recited poetic dacoit lines mid-air. Nobody survived rooftop collapses while spouting existential monologues. He rubbed his temples. "The world changed... and I didn't," he muttered.

The audience had grown smarter, hungrier, harder to impress. Liberalisation had brought satellite channels, international films, and a taste for cinema that Aatish Kapoor's rustic melodrama couldn't touch. Dacoits were retired, romantic heroes were passè, and the underworld now had leather jackets, sunglasses, and style that could kill... literally.

Aatish slumped into his sofa. Babloo, who had been quietly witnessing yet another comeback implode, finally spoke: "Sir... maybe... something new? Something fresh?"

Aatish let out a long sigh, eyes distant but stubborn. "Babloo... the clichès were at least predictable..."

Babloo nodded slowly. "Predictable... yes. But sadly, also irrelevant."

Aatish stared at the ceiling, imagining a world where audiences still cheered for dramatic hair flips instead of slow-motion gunfights.

And in that quiet, tragic, yet absurd moment, Aatish realized the cruel truth of cinema: the world moves faster than your melodrama, and sometimes survival means laughing at your own obsolescence.

Babloo, watching yet another comeback crumble, hesitated. "Sir... maybe it's not the end. It's just another bad movie which flopped. Things might change...eventually"

Aatish groaned. "Flopped? Babloo, they didn't just reject the movie—they exhumed it, waved it around, and buried it in a landfill of bad reviews."

Babloo nodded solemnly. "True... but even legends have off-days. You've survived worst. This... this is minor."

Aatish rubbed his temples. "Minor? Babloo, my minor flops once ran for weeks in Bihar!"

Babloo leaned closer. "Exactly, sir. The world may have moved on... but your glory days aren't gone. They're just... on a very long coffee break."

Aatish stared at him, sceptical but faintly amused. "A coffee break... or a coffin break?"

Babloo shrugged. "Depends on how you look at it. Either way, sir... the show must go on. And we're still alive. That counts for something."

"Three is my lucky number," Aatish mumbled.

"Why?" Babloo asked.

"I failed graduation three times... then my first movie ran housefull for three months in Bihar. Maybe the universe is sending me signals." and now three back to back flops.

Babloo squinted. "The universe? It only emits light, radiation, neutrinos... mostly stuff that doesn't care about you."

He paused. "...But maybe it also sends subtle hints... like, 'Stop making this mess, human.'"

The next few days passed in quite an average way. And then it was one of those quiet evenings when Aatish Kapoor sat in his drawing room, nursing his third peg of whiskey even though it was not yet sunset. The ceiling fan above him made a tired rattling sound, like it too had given up on life somewhere last year. Babloo sat opposite him, cross-legged on the floor, polishing Aatish's half-ripped *Filmfare Award* as if making it shine would restore its integrity and value.

"I have no movies in my kitty," Aatish declared, staring into his glass like it was a crystal ball showing him his failed future. "Bollywood has forgotten me. Like Doordarshan forgot color for the first thirty years."

Babloo looked up, blinking slowly. "Sir... we can call Pahalaj Nihalani."

Aatish froze.

Pahalaj Nihalani. The man who delivered the recent smashing hit *Shola Aur Shabnam* with Govinda and David Dhawan. And now he is planning a two-hero comedy riot with the same director. Chunkey Pandey was already confirmed for one of the leads. People said Chunkey signed so easily because

he just likes signing things. Scripts, napkins, someone's school diary—it didn't matter.

And Govinda? Well, Govinda is Govinda. Aatish always admired the man. The dance moves that defied anatomy. Expressions that switched emotions faster than cable operators changed channels during a power fluctuation. But more than anything, his legendary tradition: arriving late on set. Not ten minutes late. Not an hour late. No.

Govinda's official arrival time was "when the universe wills it."

There were stories. Many stories.

Once, David Dhawan supposedly shot three dance numbers with just a plastic mannequin because Govinda was on his way, which in Govinda's language meant he had just woken up and was eating poha somewhere in Borivali. And when Govinda did arrive, rumour says he didn't apologize—he just danced better than the mannequin, the extras, and gravity itself, and everyone forgave him instantly.

Aatish knew this was an opportunity. If Pahalaj was truly tired of late Govinda, maybe... maybe Aatish could slide in.

He sat up straight, hope glowing like a dying coal suddenly catching oxygen.

"Babloo... call Pahalaj."

Babloo dialed, spine straight like this was a military operation.

“Hello, Pahalaj ji?” Babloo said, standing suddenly as though Pahalaj could see his posture through the receiver.

Pahalaj Nihalani’s voice boomed through the speaker: warm, polite, very matter-of-fact. “Arre Babloo beta! How is Aatish? I heard he has been resting. Long rest. Extended rest. National level rest.”

Aatish flinched. Babloo continued carefully, “Sir, Aatish sir was wondering about your new film. The two-hero one with David Dhawan...You already signed Chunkey Pandey and i heard things like Govinda is a mess during shoots.”

There was a pause. A mature, realistic pause.

Then Pahalaj spoke slowly, almost kindly, “See beta... Govinda comes late. Yes. Sometimes he comes so late that the assistant director starts aging. But when he does come... he brings magic. The film becomes gold. And right now, the public wants gold.”

No insult. No cruelty. Just brutal reality served politely, like hospital food.

“We all salute the rising sun,” Pahalaj added. “And right now, beta... Govinda is sunrise.”

The call ended.

Aatish sat still.

The room felt heavy, like the air itself was wearing a black coat and shades, shaking its head.

He poured another drink.

The ceiling fan rattled again, like it was laughing.

Babloo didn't say anything.

He didn't need to.

Aatish wasted this day also like the way he wasted (not intentionally though) his last few days.

The sun next morning had no right to shine as brightly as it did. It came through the curtains like a tax inspector—aggressive, uninvited, and deeply disrespectful. Aatish groaned, clamping a pillow over his head. His tongue felt like it had been sandpapered by vengeful spirits.

He sat up slowly, hair pointing in five geographical directions.

And there was Babloo.

Standing at the foot of the bed.

Smiling.

Not a normal smile. A my-life-is-about-to-change-but-yours-might-not smile. Worse than a dentist's smile. Worse than a landlord's smile. The smile of a man who has news.

"What," Aatish croaked, "do you want?"

Babloo clasped his hands reverently. "You won't believe this. Yash Chopra is making a thriller."

Aatish blinked. "Yash Chopra? The king of chiffon sarees, Switzerland songs, slow-motion romance running in mustard fields... that Yash Chopra?"

“Yes,” Babloo said, nodding so hard his head was in danger of becoming a separate entity. “But this time—no tulips. No violins. A thriller. Sunny Deol and Juhi Chawla are already signed.”

Sunny Deol. Aatish rubbed his temples. Sunny could shout at thunder and it would fucking apologize. Juhi could smile at a wall and the wall would blush.

“And there is a third character,” Babloo continued. “A strong role. Negative role. Insanely powerful presence on screen.”

Aatish stared.

Babloo leaned in, whispering dramatically: “Aamir Khan was supposed to do it. But he asked for joint narration with the both the leads. Yashji got offended. Said, ‘I don’t narrate in groups. This is not a fucking housing society meeting.’ And threw him out.”

Aatish blinked. “Thrown out. By Yash Chopra.”

Babloo nodded with the solemnity of recounting a war casualty.

“Ajay Devgan refused the role,” Babloo added. “Said he doesn't want to play negative so early in his career. Wants to be a hero for at least five years before scaring the public.”

Now Aatish was awake.

Fully.

“Do you think I should do a negative role?” he asked.

Babloo struck a lecturer's pose. "This is image shift. This is reinvention. This is phoenix-from-ashes moment. You'll be 'intense.' 'Edgy.' Critics will write essays. College students will say you're misunderstood. It's perfect."

Aatish's eyes shone. "Call Yashji. Call him now."

Mission Meet Yash Chopra begins

(as experienced by Babloo, who suffered most)

Attempt One: Babloo calls Yash Raj office. Receptionist says Yashji is "in a meeting." Translation: "He knows who is calling."

Attempt Two: Babloo sends flowers. Yashji returns them with a polite thank-you note... and a copy of The Bhagavad Gita. Message unclear.

Attempt Three: Aatish attends a party where Yashji is rumoured to appear. He waits three hours. Yashji leaves by the back gate. Aatish leaves by the front. They miss each other like a tragic romance in a parallel universe.

Attempt Four: They go to Yash Chopra's bungalow. Security guard says: "Sir is out of station."

From inside the bungalow, the sound of someone directing a servant to get more tea.

Aatish stares at the gate, wounded soul mode activated.

"Maybe I can climb the wall," he says.

Babloo says, "And then we can explain to police that you were breaking in to get a film role? Very heroic."

Two days later, Babloo entered the living room quietly. No triumphant smile this time—just the expression of someone who knows he is holding news that might bruise.

Aatish didn't look up from the joint he was rolling. "So?" he asked, as casually as one asks about the weather, though his fingers trembled slightly.

Babloo cleared his throat. "Yash Chopra has finalized the role."

Aatish froze. "Who?"

There was a pause, the kind that decides futures.

"He didn't go with any of the established names," Babloo said softly. "He has signed... a new boy. Just came to Bombay. From Delhi. Did some television work. Very... intense face, apparently."

Aatish slowly looked up. His expression blank, calm, almost gentle. Like a man listening to the sound of his own throne being dismantled.

"What's his name?" he asked.

Babloo hesitated only once and replied, "Shah Rukh Khan."

Interlude

A Nation in Technicolor - How India Watched Itself Onscreen.

The story of the Hindi film industry—what we now casually call Bollywood while sipping chai and debating box office

numbers—is not just the story of movies. It's the story of India learning to see itself. Cinema here did not merely entertain. It instructed, inspired, seduced, scolded, reassured, distracted, provoked, and occasionally lied with great confidence. If India was a newly independent dreamer, Bollywood was its mirror, sometimes clean and sincere, sometimes cracked and dramatic, often coated with a thick glamorous varnish.

When India woke up after 1947, groggy from colonial hangover and the trauma of Partition, the country was trying to figure out what it wanted to be. A modern socialist utopia? A cultural motherland of ancient wisdom? A land of dams, steel plants, and five-year plans? Or a giant adda for debates over chai?

Cinema did what India itself was doing—pretending it already knew.

The Nehruvian era believed in idealism, and Bollywood took that seriously. Very seriously. The hero was not some dude with gelled hair and sunglasses. He was usually: an honest worker at a textile mill or a farmer with cracked heels and enormous dignity.

Or a struggling teacher who taught values without asking for tuition fees.

No abs. No protein shakes. But he had morals, which were considered even more attractive at the time.

Studios were run like moral factories—stars on monthly salaries, a strict sense of discipline, and a clear belief that

cinema could build the nation. Films like *Do Bigha Zameen, Mother India, Naya Daur* and *Shri 420* told India: "We have suffered. But we are good people. We work hard. We will rebuild. And also, please don't cheat on your taxes."

Songs celebrated dams, trains, and factories as though they were Bollywood celebrities in their own right. If a government public project had a ribbon-cutting ceremony, chances were someone, somewhere, was writing a song about it.

And then there were The Big Three.

Raj Kapoor—the Chaplin-like romantic socialist who somehow always found time to flirt while also representing the moral conscience of the poor.

Dilip Kumar—*tragedy ka thehrav*, the man who made sadness fashionable long before heartbreak was sold in neon font on Instagram.

Dev Anand—the ever-smiling, cigarette-flicking, scarf-wearing embodiment of "Life may be hard but I will stay charming."

These three weren't just actors—they were philosophies.

Meanwhile, Partition left emotional debris in every household, and the films gently tried to put balm on those wounds. Secularism, humanism, community—these were not chapter headings in NCERT books yet. They were movie plots. Filmmakers like *Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy, V. Shantaram,* and *Guru Dutt* treated cinema like literature—poetic, tender, bruised, hopeful. *Guru Dutt*, particularly, made cinema that

was so beautiful and melancholic that half the audience came out of the theatre ready to smoke a cigarette and stare meaningfully into the horizon for 2.5 hours.

But time, as always, loves to change the vibe.

Enter the 1960s: Romance, Colour, Tourism, and Guitar-Girl Swooning Package

By the time the 60s arrived, India had cried enough. People looked around and said, "We have been building the nation for a decade. Can we now please have some fun and *Yahoo* on screen?"

And Bollywood, ever the dutiful reflection, said, "We are loving it!"

The world suddenly turned Technicolor, and so did the emotions. The national mood shifted from moral seriousness to romantic daydreaming. If the 50s hero fought capitalism, the 60s hero fought heartbreak—and looked good doing it.

Shammi Kapoor entered like a rockstar who had somehow wandered into the wrong movie studio but perfectly understood the assignment anyway. His hair bounced. His shirts dazzled. His dancing broke the previously accepted laws of physics and grace. Girls swooned. Boys tried to copy and fell off tables.

Movies travelled too. If you couldn't go to Paris, Paris came to the cinema hall. Hill stations became essential. Half of Hindi cinema romance happened on slopes so steep that one wondered how no hero ever fell and died mid-song.

This was the decade India decided that being rich was not a moral crime. A hero could drive a convertible and still have a "good heart." The villains, for now, were only suspicious moustache-twirling uncles—not systems or states.

And then lightning struck.

1969–1972: Rajesh Khanna and The Great National Sigh

The first superstar—not actor, not hero, not beloved figure—but SUPERSTAR emerged.

Rajesh Khanna.

The man whose mere sigh could send an entire nation into hormonal disarray.

He didn't walk. He floated.

He didn't talk. He murmured like your name was the most beautiful poem ever written.

With Kishore Kumar singing like a timeless breeze and R.D. Burman composing melodies that still haunt wedding playlists, Rajesh Khanna became less a human and more an emotion. People didn't watch him—they felt him. Between 1969 and 1972, Rajesh Khanna went on a 17-movie box office rampage so ridiculous that rival producers probably considered retiring. He didn't just break records; he sparked a nationwide fever that had people unironically believing the universe had a simple hierarchy: "*Upar Aaka,Niche Kaka(People called him Kaka with affection)"*

Essentially, God handled the universe, and Kaka handled the box office—and for three glorious years, neither took a day off.

Every boy thought he could be him.

Every girl believed she would one day be serenaded by a man leaning on a lamp post while looking directly into her soul.

India was in love—with love itself.

But love is fragile, and romance collapses the moment inflation hits the grocery bill.By the mid-1970s, the national romantic fantasy expired, leaving behind a cold, brutal hangover: **The State Is Bankrupt, And So Are You.**

Nobody had the luxury of writing love letters in blood anymore—not when blood was the only thing left to sell for groceries. India was done shivering passionately in the snow; it was time to pick up an iron pipe, beat the corruption out of the system, and demand an immediate refund for the dream they'd been sold.

Rajesh Khanna was a dreamy luxury India couldn't afford once the economic hangover kicked in, proving even the ultimate Superstar gets replaced when the country can no longer afford bread.

The economy crumbled. Corruption grew like weeds. Poverty refused to leave. The idealism of the Nehru years cracked like old paint. Then came The Emergency, censorship, fear, public frustration simmering everywhere. The romantic hero, no matter how dreamy, was now irrelevant.

Those were the years when the bright lights of post-independence optimism began flickering like a dying tube-light in a government office corridor. The Nehruvian dream of a just, rational, socialist India—where dams were "temples" and the future was a shining highway—began to feel like an old melodrama whose climax never arrives. By now, the motherland was less Bharat Mata smiling benevolently and more the exasperated matriarch at the ration shop arguing over kerosene quotas.

Arthur Miller once remarked that an era ends when its basic illusions are exhausted. That was India in the mid 70s: illusions were not merely exhausted, they were bedridden, coughing, and asking for warm water.

The political climate was shifting. The wars of the 60s had bruised the national psyche. Prices were rising. Jobs were scarce. The "License Raj" turned everyday life into a maze of signatures, stamps, and bribes. The average citizen no longer hoped for utopia; he simply hoped the electricity wouldn't disappear during dinner.

It is always the cinema that registers the pulse first.

The Romantic Hero Becomes a Relic

The 1960s hero sang songs in Kashmir valleys, wore pastel sweaters, and made eye contact that suggested eternal devotion. *Rajesh Khanna* became a national fever—women wrote letters to him in blood (a gesture perhaps not recommended by physicians). Films like *Aradhana* (1969) and

Kati Patang (1971) floated on melodies and gentle romance. India still believed in tenderness then.

But that tenderness did not survive the decade.

The country was no longer leaning out of train windows singing love songs. It was standing in queues for ration. It was arguing with clerks. It was watching corruption climb like ivy over every institution.

And then—cinema changed tone.

The Rise of the Angry Young Man.

The romantic hero suddenly looked out of place, like he had wandered into the wrong film. By the early 70s, the audience wasn't asking, "Will he get the girl?" They were asking, "But who will get justice?"

And into this unsettled climate walked a tall, awkwardly lean man with a voice that sounded like it remembered storms.

The Man Who Was Tired of Being Good

Amitabh Bachchan.

He did not smile softly.

He did not bring flowers.

He did not serenade in gardens.

He glowered.

He questioned.

He burned.

If *Rajesh Khanna* was the gentle sigh of a love letter, *Amitabh Bachchan* was the slam of a table in a police station.

The scripts that shaped this transformation were written by Salim-Javed—two screenwriters who understood that India was no longer in love; India was angry. Their films gave voice to the unspoken sentiment of the nation: frustration.

Zanjeer (1973) was the turning point. *Inspector Vijay* was a man betrayed by authority, not protected by it. He was the orphan of the system—a system that claimed to serve justice but served files instead. Audiences saw themselves in him. They too had done everything "right" and still ended up cheated.

And then came *Deewar* (1975), the great epic of wounded morality. Two brothers—one inside the law, one outside it—both trying to survive a world where the state had failed them. Here, the legendary dialogue landed like a punch not just in the story, but in the national consciousness:

"Mere paas maa hai."

This was not just sentiment. This was the country declaring: You may have money and power and the system—but we still have the last remaining emotional truth.

It was the Salim-Javed pen that turned internal despair into cinematic thunder.

The Emergency — When the State Became the Villain

In 1975, the Emergency was declared. Censorship tightened. Voices were jailed. Newspapers printed silence where headlines should have been.

If the people were already seething with disillusionment, now they were forced to swallow it quietly.

Cinema, of course, found its way.

Then comes, which is arguably the greatest Hindi movie ever made.

Sholay (1975) was not just a dacoit film. It was about a village where the state is absent, and justice is personal. The government is nowhere, the police are powerless, and the hero does not wait for law—he makes it.

In a country where the police seemed permanently one jeep short and three hours late, the solution to lawlessness was apparently to hire two small-time crooks. The film's moral universe was delightfully simple: when the system fails, outsource justice to men with criminal records and good comic timing. It was a very 1970s idea of governance—if the state cannot catch the bandit, perhaps the bandit-catching should be privatized.

Deewar, Kaala Patthar, Trishul, Muqaddar Ka Sikandar—every film was a battle cry disguised as a plot.

And the hero of these films was always outsider, wounded, distrustful of authority.

Amitabh's characters were working class—dock workers, coal miners, taxi drivers—men who have nothing except their dignity and their rage.

When he says in Deewar:

"Main aaj bhi phenke hue paise nahi uthata,"

it was not swagger.

It was a code.

A line in the sand.

A declaration that the hero may bend under hardship, but he will not break before power.

This was not anger without cause.

This was anger because of cause.

Masculinity, Morality, and the New Hero

The hero of the Nehruvian era won through goodness.

The hero of the 1970s won by enduring pain.

He was violent, yes—but his violence was moral.

He fought for the poor, the humiliated, the powerless.

He intervened when others looked away.

He refused to watch injustice unfold in silence.

He was not rebelling against society—he was rebelling for society.

The brooding, uncompromising "Vijay" became the national archetype. And India, tired of composing love letters, now wrote manifestos of anger across the screen.

The Dream Was Dead — But Cinema Found Honesty

The Nehruvian dream did not collapse quietly.

It collapsed loudly, bitterly, in public.

But in the ashes, cinema rediscovered something valuable:

Truth.

Not idealism, not fantasy, not utopia—

but the truth of struggle.

The truth of being let down.

The truth of wanting to fight back.

Amitabh Bachchan did not play a hero.

He played a wound.

And an entire nation, bruised and disappointed, saw itself in him and finally whispered:

Yes. That is us.

Meanwhile, somewhere in Kanpur, a small boy sat in a crowded hall, knees tucked to his chest, watching Amitabh deliver justice with fists instead of petitions. The screen shook, the crowd whistled, and something irreversible happened inside him.

"*Haan... yeh hi toh hero hai.*" (Yes... this is the real hero.)

That boy was Nitin Tiwari—too young to know the word cinema, but old enough to feel its pull. A dream began, quietly, without permission.

Cinema and Nation: Two Mirrors Facing Each Other

India was growing, stumbling, and reinventing itself. Cinema walked alongside, sometimes ahead, sometimes pretending it knew the way.

Whenever India tried to be idealistic, cinema wore a white kurta and spoke in poetry.

When India felt romantic, cinema put on sunglasses, picked up a guitar, and flew to foreign locations.

And somewhere between those shifting frames—between fists and philosophy, dreams and disillusionment—Nitin kept watching, believing the screen was not just reflecting the nation, but offering him a place inside it.

Chapter 2:

The Superstar from Kanpur

Bollywood didn't just belong to Bombay. No, no—Bombay merely hosted the factory. The distribution centre was the entire nation. From Kashmir to Kanyakumari, every railway station wall, paan shop shutter, and barber shop mirror carried the same gospel: If they can become stars, why not you? After all, this was India—land of democracy, spirituality, and wildly unrealistic career expectations.

By the 80s, cinema had replaced oxygen. People didn't just watch movies—they inhaled them. Bombay was the stomach, but the rest of India was the intestine—absorbing every last nutrient and delusion Bollywood produced. The films taught India many things: how to love intensely, how to cry passionately, and how to throw a punch that sends ten grown men flying into decorative fruit crates. Physics didn't stand a chance. Neither did good sense.

In the smaller towns—the Kanpurs, Bareillys, Durgapurs—Bollywood wasn't entertainment. It was a public health hazard.

It encouraged people to dream. And not modest dreams like "get a steady job" or "buy a second-hand scooter," but towering fantasies— everyone wanted to be the next Amitabh Bachchan. In reality, most couldn't even put on a believable performance while bargaining for vegetables. No dialogue modulation, no screen presence, no dramatic pause—just a timid "*bhaiya thoda kam kar do na*" followed by instant defeat and full payment. Bollywood smiled indulgently and said, everyone has potential. Reality cleared its throat and replied, Wonderful. Start by convincing the vegetable seller. We'll talk about the audience later.

Theatres in small cities became pilgrimage sites where dreams were blessed and self-awareness went to die. People clapped for hero entries like they were national achievements. Meanwhile, the hero on screen danced in the rain with a woman who clearly had no immune system and everyone watching thought, Yes. That will be my life soon! Never mind the fact that they couldn't maintain eye contact with the neighborhood chemist.

Bollywood sold the most addictive drug in the country: Possibility. A dangerous, intoxicating possibility that whispered, "You are special"! The country listened. The country believed. The country ignored the mirror completely.

"False, glittering, gloriously stupid hope".

And that is where our next hero enters. Or rather, where he imagines his entry with a wind machine blowing dramatically behind him.

But in reality, it's just Kanpur in June and a ceiling fan on speed three.

Kanpur was not a city; Kanpur was a mood. A very specific mood that smelled permanently of leather factories, ambition, and spit stains shaped like the map of India. If Bombay was the city of dreams, Kanpur was the city of dreams spoken—loudly, confidently—and then promptly dissolved in a cloud of tobacco-flavored reality.

Every street corner had its own philosopher-poet, all of them speaking in fast, red-tinted sentences. Men didn't chew gutkha in Kanpur—gutkha was their emotional support system. It was a pause button, a confidence booster, and sometimes, when life was especially cruel, dinner.

And yet, in the middle of this entire spit-stained swagger, Kanpur produced dreamers. Boys who believed they were destined to be on the silver screen. Boys who looked at skyscrapers in Filmfare Magazine and said:

"Haan, yeh toh humse ho jayega."

Even while their tongue was still numb from gutkha no. 6 extra strong.

They say legends are born, not made. In Nitin Tiwari's case, the legend came pre-packaged at birth, courtesy of his mother.

According to family folklore (which his mother repeated with the confidence of someone narrating NASA's moon landing), baby Nitin did not cry when he was born. No. He

smiled. A slow, camera-ready, "track the spotlight here, please" kind of smile. A smile meant for a dramatic close-up.

Of course, this was biologically impossible. Babies don't smile on day one unless it's gas or divine prank. But Nitin believed it. And why wouldn't he? Every small-town Indian child grows up with one belief stronger than the Constitution: "Mummy never lies."

So Nitin lived his childhood with the unwavering conviction that he was born for the camera. School report cards said "average", neighbours said "normal", but Nitin knew. Some men wait for destiny. Some men are destiny. Or at least that's what his mother told him between stirring dal and telling papa he should stop buying gutkha.

But the true ignition of his Bollywood fever happened when he was in Class 4 and his parents took him to watch *Haathi Mere Saathi* at the local cinema hall.

The cinema hall was not particularly impressive: a rusted ceiling fan making noises like it was negotiating with death, chairs that complained louder than the audience, and a screen that flickered like a tired ghost. But when the lights dimmed and the projector clattered awake, Nitin felt something cosmic—like the theatre seat had opened into a portal.

As *Rajesh Khanna* appeared on screen, smiling with the casual authority of a man who knew entire nations swooned for him, something inside Nitin's heart stood up and saluted.

He didn't have the vocabulary then to describe it. He didn't know what cinema was. He didn't know what acting meant. He didn't know a hero was human, breakable, prone to tax fraud and divorces. He just knew one thing:

This was life.

Not the narrow lanes of Kanpur. Not multiplication tables. Not the daily soundtrack of pressure cooker whistles and neighbourly quarrels.

No.

This. This world of songs, slow-motion smiles, elephants that understood friendship, and love that could stop traffic.

He didn't yet know that life was not a movie. That real elephants don't dance, Rajesh Khanna doesn't show up at weddings in Kanpur, and heroes also have to file income tax returns.

But at that moment?

Nitin Tiwari wasn't in the theatre.

He was in destiny's waiting room.

And destiny, like all things in India, would take its own sweet time.

When the film ended and the hall lights flickered back to life, the Nitin who walked out was not the same Nitin who had shuffled in with sticky hands and a borrowed handkerchief. Something had shifted inside him. Small towns often brag that their children are changed forever after one moment — topping

exams, winning cricket matches, eating sixteen *golgappas* in a row — but those are trivial transformations. What happened to Nitin was of a different order. It was as though some invisible hand had gently twisted his internal compass towards a faraway glittering North — Bombay.

For in that theatre, he had witnessed a world where life did not creak and groan under dust and tuition fees and broken drainage pipes. He had seen a universe where life carried its own background score, soft and orchestral, rising and falling with one's heart. Not like Kanpur, where every emotion was accompanied by honking scooters and a neighbour yelling at his wife because someone forgot to buy *dhaniya* again. No — this world was designed. Crafted. Beautiful.

And oh, the hero and heroine — how effortlessly they broke into song. Without coughing. Without warming up. Without even checking if the lyrics rhymed with anything. Just one look into each other's eyes and suddenly violins, flutes, drums, and a chorus of perfectly synchronized strangers appeared, dancing in gardens where not a single leaf dared to misbehave. It was not love — it was choreography.

When Nitin stepped outside, the street looked terribly ordinary. A cow stood chewing plastic with the wisdom of an ancient philosopher. A rickshaw bell clanged off-key. Someone spat gutkha in an arc of careless artistry. The magic of the last three hours clashed violently with the familiar ugliness around him.

But the magic was stronger.

The world he had seen inside that theatre — that was real. This — Kanpur, dust, noise, gutkha, and all — this was just an illusion.

And just like that, without announcing it to anyone, without even fully understanding it himself, Nitin Tiwari decided he was not meant for this reality. He was meant for that one he saw onscreen.

The one where the music always knew when to start.

Nitin had tasted cinema the way, legend says, a cannibal lion tastes human blood — once is enough to ruin him for ordinary existence. After that first viewing, there was no going back to crayons, matchbox cars, or the noble career of collecting empty Parle-G wrappers. While other children asked for toys, chocolates, and balloons shaped like vaguely disturbing animals, Nitin's requests were different.

"Beta, what do you want for your birthday?" his mother would ask gently.

"A ticket to whichever movie has the biggest hero entry," he would reply with the solemnity of a saint who has renounced all worldly temptations, except cinema and salted popcorn.

Other parents threatened their children with exam results — "If you fail, no new toy!" But Nitin's parents had evolved into a special category of motivational strategists.

"If you get above 70%," his father would say, leaning forward as though sharing a state secret, "we will take you for the First Day First Show of Rajesh Khanna's new film."

And Nitin would study like he was preparing for the Indian Civil Services.

While classmates dreamed of becoming astronauts, doctors, or at least the guy who owns the biggest paan shop in the neighbourhood, Nitin only dreamed of that dark theatre where life had a soundtrack, where love was sung, and where good men delivered justice with slow-motion hand gestures.

He was doomed — gloriously, cinematically doomed.

Nitin grew, and cinema grew with him—though, to be honest, cinema did not merely grow. It shifted continents. It changed weather patterns. It bent the emotional climate of a whole nation. One could say India didn't just watch movies; India lived them, inhaled them, and occasionally misquoted them in daily arguments.

The soft, rose-tinted kingdom of Rajesh Khanna—where troubles could be solved by a sideways smile and a gentle head-tilt—began to fade like old wallpaper in summer heat. The songs remained, but the innocence evaporated. India was changing. The long Emergency loomed or had just ended (depending which chai stall you asked), unemployment simmered, frustration bubbled—and into this pressure cooker walked a tall, lean man with eyes like lit matchsticks.

Amitabh Bachchan. The Angry Young Man.

He did not tilt his head. He tilted the entire emotional axis of the country.

Suddenly, every second person in India had become angry. Angry at the police. Angry at politicians. Angry at relatives who asked for too much wedding money. Angry at the price of onions. And angry in a cinematic way—stare first, talk later, punch last.

It was 1975 when Nitin's parents took him to watch *Deewar.* The theatre was packed, thick with the scent of tobacco, hairoil, and dreams. As the film rolled, the entire audience sat leaning forward—not because the seats were uncomfortable (which they were), but because the film demanded it.

And when Amitabh Bachchan delivered "*Main aaj bhi phenke hue paise nahin uthaata*", India collectively gasped. This was a revelation. A philosophy. A manifesto. A moral code delivered through a jaw so clenched it could crack almonds.

By the time the film ended, the whole theatre marched out as if the revolution was scheduled for that very evening.

People walked differently. Their shoulders were stiffer. Their eyebrows had descended. A man buying jalebis at the stall outside did so with the intensity of someone confronting Fate. An auto driver shouted at a cow for blocking the road—because now, we fight injustice everywhere.

And Nitin—sweet, directionless, chocolate-loving Nitin—was transformed.

He walked home in silence, hands behind his back, like a retired freedom fighter recalling betrayal. His mother asked if

he wanted roti or puri. He looked at her with the weariness of a man who had seen too much and said:

"Whatever you think is right."

He was ten.

He had no idea what corruption was.

The worst injustice he had faced was losing his water bottle to the class monitor.

But cinema had done what cinema does in India—it had rewired his emotional circuitry.

It gave him an enemy to glare at (even if it was just the ceiling fan).

It gave him purpose (vague purpose, but purpose nonetheless).

It gave him rage without context—which, incidentally, is the most Indian rage of all.

Cinema had changed him.

And soon, it would decide his fate.

The same year that *Deewar* rewired something inside Nitin Tiwari's mind, *Sholay* marched into Indian cinema like a cyclone wearing boots. And for Nitin, it was not just a film. It was a revelation disguised as a three-and-a-half-hour spectacle with horses, harmoniums, and homicidal laughter.

So, one sticky afternoon, instead of going to school to learn about photosynthesis and perennial crops, Nitin and his

closest friend, Mukesh, decided to invest in real education—the kind projected onto a giant screen. Their parents, poor unsuspecting souls, had given them fifty paise each to buy sweets, but the boys had found something sweeter in life: Cinema. And cinema costs tickets, not toffees.

They marched to Prakash Talkies, the pride of Kanpur's cultural infrastructure, where the seats were so old the springs inside them poked you like existential reminders of the Indian middle class. They bought the cheapest balcony tickets known to mankind—the ones that came with no guarantee of seat cushioning or emotional stability.

The cinema guard looked at them the way teachers look at students who laugh during morning prayer. Suspicious. Disappointed. Certain of mischief. But Nitin and Mukesh held out their tickets like two revolutionaries holding their freedom passes. The guard sighed, stepped aside, and let fate take over.

The hall was dark. The projector sputtered.

And then—

SHOLAY BEGAN.

When Dharmendra swaggered onto the screen as Veeru, Nitin felt adrenaline in places he did not previously know adrenaline could exist. Veeru was charming, loud, romantic, reckless—the kind of man who could flirt with a girl, drink an entire quarter bottle, and still have enough energy to climb a water tower and threaten suicide just to get his girlfriend's aunt to agree to the marriage.

Then came Jai—Amitabh Bachchan—tall, brooding, and speaking so little that every word felt like a prophecy. Nitin immediately tried to talk less too, thinking perhaps mystery would make him appear heroic. (To the dismay of everyone, it made him look constipated.)

Basanti arrived next, talking faster than Kanpur's electricity shortage alerts. Mukesh whispered, "Does she even inhale?" They agreed she must have evolved gills.

And then—Gabbar Singh.

Not just a villain.

A lifestyle choice.

When he asked, "*Kitne aadmi the*?" the entire hall collectively forgot how to blink. Nitin felt something spiritual. Mukesh felt something gastrointestinal.

And Thakur, tragic Thakur, with sleeves that mocked the concept of sleeves. When his past was revealed, Nitin nearly wept like a widow whose husband got martyred in battle.

But the true impact came in the *Jai–Veeru* friendship.

Two men.

One soul.

One harmonica.

By the time the duo sat on the hillside, sharing banter and destiny, Nitin and Mukesh were holding hands, silently making what they believed was the promise of a lifetime:

"We are Jai and Veeru forever."

Forever lasted three days, until they fought over who got to bat first during gully cricket, and Mukesh threw a bat at Nitin's forehead.

But that night, that experience, *Sholay* stitched itself into Nitin's blood. The world outside Prakash Talkies looked boring—flat—missing background music and slow-motion running. Real life had traffic, cow dung, and paan juice stains—not drama.

Nitin did not walk out of that theatre.

He descended like a hero making an entry shot.

The cinema had chosen him.

And he, poor boy, was already helplessly, hopelessly, beautifully devoured.

When Nitin turned sixteen, something very dangerous happened—his mother, in a moment of affectionate foolishness, looked at him and said, "Arre, *bilkul Rishi Kapoor lagta hai mera beta!"* She meant it in the way mothers often mean absurd things—like how every child's drawing is "just like *Picasso*" and how the chapati the child rolls is "perfectly round" when in fact it looks like the South American continent. But Nitin took it as prophecy. Fate. Celestial announcement.

He didn't sleep that night. He stared at the ceiling, imagining himself dancing in slow motion through mustard fields, Rishi Kapoor style in a sweater that India's heat waves could not

defeat. His destiny was Bollywood, and the narrow gullies of Kanpur were not worthy of such magnificence. The city should have built a red carpet for him; instead, it offered drainage lanes and cows chewing plastic.

But to become a hero, one requires training. A polishing of emotions, tragedy, comedic timing—the works. Unfortunately, Kanpur in those days did not have acting schools, theatre workshops, or star-maker academies. What it had was the Ramleela Maidan behind the temple, where the local boys played gods with painted moustaches and borrowed accents.

So Nitin, future superstar in the making, began his career not as Ram, not even Lakshman, not even a demon with two lines—but as Monkey No. 7 in the vanar sena.

Now, to be fair, there were nearly forty monkeys. All looked identical in masks that smelled of sweat and ambition. Yet Nitin was determined to stand out.

How does one stand out as a monkey?

Expression. Gesture. Back scratching technique.

While others scratched casually, Nitin scratched like he was peeling mangoes for the nation. While they hopped modestly, Nitin leaped with a poetic flourish that suggested Shakespeare had written stage direction just for him: "Exit monkey, heroically."

The village aunties whispered, "*Yeh kaun sa bandar hai jo itna natak karta hai*?"

But somebody noticed the spark. And that somebody was the Ramleela director, Pandit Balkrishna—who had cataracts in one eye but perfect instinct in matters of drama.

By the time Nitin was twenty, the world (or at least the 4,000 residents of that part of Kanpur) felt ready to witness his transformation. The role of Lord Ram opened up—its previous performer having left for a job in Punjab National Bank. Nitin was chosen.

The audition consisted mostly of saying, "*Lakshman, dhanush lao.*" But Nitin said the line with such majesty, such cosmic authority, that even Lakshman forgot to bring the bow.

The night of the performance, Nitin walked onto the stage painted in a fair foundation so thick that it cracked every time he blinked. When he lifted his arm, the crowd clapped. When he smiled, the aunties threw flowers. When he stood still, someone fainted—though that may have been due to heat and jostling.

And there he was—no longer Monkey No. 7. No longer a boy with borrowed movie dreams.

He was Ram.

He was the hero.

He was Kanpur's *Rishi Kapoor*.

At least in his own head—and sometimes, that is where stardom truly begins.

It was around this time—when Nitin was walking around with divine confidence, fresh from playing Lord Ram—that romance decided to drop into his life like a melodramatic slow-motion entrance.

Her name was Gita, the new girl in his college. The moment he saw her, the orchestra inside his head started playing "*Ek main aur ek tu... Dono mile iss tarah*" on repeat. He didn't walk that day—he glided.

Nitin was convinced that he was *Rishi Kapoor* and she was *Neetu Singh*, reincarnated for this very Kanpur Love Story Cinematic Universe. And truth be told—he was good-looking. Fair enough to be noticed. Fair enough to stand out. Fair enough that aunties often whispered, "*Rang to accha hai ladke ka.*" Which in small-town language is the highest compliment one can hope for before marriage.

Maybe that was why his mother had casually said he looked like Rishi Kapoor years ago. But Nitin had taken it as blood oath destiny.

Love in small towns is never straightforward. It involves bicycles. A lot of bicycles.

So Nitin, dressed in his best shirt (the one with tiny palm trees printed on it), began cycling behind Gita every morning. Not close enough to be creepy, but close enough to be obvious. The choreographed chase was its own film song—him pedalling slowly, hair flying, her pretending not to look back but absolutely looking back.

And when she did finally glance, his heart performed a backflip worthy of Olympic scoring.

And then—the smile.

That shy, I-know-you-are-looking-and-I-am-also-looking-but-we-won't-say-anything smile.

It was better than any applause he had received on stage. Even better than the "*Waah Ram waah*!" someone had yelled the other night.

Soon, Nitin was spending more time polishing his cycle than studying. He washed it, wiped it, decorated it—he even tied a small red ribbon to the handle, convinced romance is 20% emotion, 80% presentation.

Seeing him float around college like a helium balloon, his friends intervened.

"*Bhai, letter likh*," a friend declared with the authority of someone who had never successfully romanced anyone.

"*Letter se hi kaam hota hai. Mohabbat ka first step.*"

Nitin nodded seriously as if he was quoting Kabir instead of gossiping between samosa bites.

So now, the love story prepared to take its next step:

Ink. Paper. And a boy who believed he was the hero of the film playing inside his head.

The stage was set. The music was ready.

The bicycle shone.

Gita passed by every day.

And Nitin...

Nitin was in love—*Rishi Kapoor* style.

Finally, he wrote a letter assembling all the knowledge he had about love which he got of course from movies

My Dearest (Miss) Gita,

First of all, I hope this letter finds you in good health and top attendance. I have seen that you sit in the second row from the left, which I personally believe is the best row, because it gets equal sunlight and equal fan breeze. This shows how balanced your personality is.

I do not know how to start this, so I will start from the beginning. When I saw you for the first time near the college gate, time stopped. I don't mean literally, because the clock in the corridor is broken anyway, but I mean inside my heart which at that moment suffered what medical science would probably classify as "complete and irreversible loss of common sense."

You may not know me personally, but I am the same Nitin who played Lord Ram in the Ramleela this year. I know God teaches us to be humble, but the audience said I was very convincing. Even Pandit-ji said "*beta tu to sach mein Ram ban sakta hai.*" I don't know if he meant in acting or in life, but I have kept that in mind.

Coming back to the main point, I feel I have special feelings for you. The type of feelings which *Rishi Kapoor* had for *Neetu Singh* in all films. Actually my mother once said I resemble *Rishi Kapoor* in my childhood. So it is destiny. *Rishi + Neetu = Nitin + Gita.* You can do the mathematics now.

I will not say that I have loved you from the moment I saw you, because that sounds filmy, but yes, it is exactly like that only.

If you also feel something similar—even 10%—please give me a sign:

Next time when you come to college, just look at me for 3 seconds and then look away shyly. (But please make sure it is me you are looking at and not Mukesh. He is my friend but sometimes he stands too close.)

If you do not feel the same, it is okay. I will understand. I will just feel emotional pain like in sad songs, but I will handle. But if you say yes, I will be very happy and I will walk you home and pretend I am not extending the route by fifteen minutes just to spend more time with you.

Yours Faithfully, Respectfully, Filmy-ly,

Nitin (a.k.a. Your Potential *Rishi Kapoor*)

In Kanpur of those days, delivering a love letter was not simply "giving a letter." It was a covert military operation, requiring planning, espionage, psychological warfare, and sometimes divine intervention. If NASA had recruited from small towns, half of Kanpur's boys would be running Mars

missions today—because they already treated giving a love letter as interplanetary diplomacy.

Talking to the opposite sex was harder than getting a passport made, and that too without "agent." The famous expression "Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus" was not just a metaphor in Kanpur—here, both species lived on completely different planets, separated by parents, neighbours, tuition teachers, and that one aunty who ALWAYS stands on her balcony at the exact wrong moment.

So, the question arose: Who will deliver The Letter?

Nitin could not do it himself. That would be too obvious. Too bold. Too filmy. And also, he did not have the courage.

Enter Mukesh — the legendary partner-in-crime, the *Jai* to Nitin's *Veeru*, though without the harmonica and dramatic background score. Mukesh was the kind of friend who would share his tiffin, his notebook, and even take scolding on behalf of others, but when it came to girls, he acted like he was negotiating peace between two nuclear nations.

Nitin handed the letter to Mukesh like commanders exchange classified files.

"Handle it carefully," Nitin whispered.

Mukesh nodded with the seriousness of a RAW agent.

"Don't worry. *Gita tak pohoncha diya jayega."*

At that moment, they weren't two boys from Kanpur.

They were heroes.

On a mission.

Mukesh, before leaving, puffed up his chest and said with full divine conviction that even he didn't completely understand:

"Do not worry. I am *Hanuman.* You are *Ram.* And this letter... is the *Sanjivani Booti* of Love." Wrong example but suits the moment.

Nitin nodded like it was written in the Vedas.

Mukesh then marched away with the gait of a mythological hero—except he was wobbling slightly because he had tied the letter inside his shirt to make the delivery more "filmy."

Mukesh carried the letter like it was a nuclear code. He walked toward Gita with the stiff posture of a man who had accepted his fate—life, death, humiliation, all possible outcomes. Nitin watched from behind a tree, half praying, half sweating.

Gita took the letter shyly, her friends exploded into giggles, she read it later, and the next day she gave Nitin the secret *3 seconds signal.* Friends demanded a celebration. Life was beautiful. Romance was real.

Soon after, Gita's best friend approached Nitin and handed him a carefully folded pink paper. The return letter. The holy reply. The "Yes I also" document.

Nitin opened it, and inside — written with a floral scented pen — was:

Dear Nitin,

I read your letter yesterday night and I was smiling for ten minutes. My mother thought I remembered some joke but it was you.

I also like you.

Your hair is very nice the way it moves when you ride the cycle fast.

And your eyes sometimes look very deep like those Hindi film heroes who have seen tragedy.

Once during class, you looked outside the window for a full five seconds. I think you were thinking about the pain of the world. Very poetic.

I also like how you stand with one shoulder slightly higher. It is stylish.

But please do not stand near the boys who spit gutkha. It will spoil your hero image.

We will talk more during the library period when Sister Rosy is sleeping like usual.

Yours (secretly),

Gita

P.S. Do not tell anything to your cousin Rekha. She opens her mouth more than Kanpur taxi drivers open their doors.

Nitin read the letter three times. Then held it to his chest like it was a childhood dream that finally found its address.

And that day, in the great city of Kanpur, love officially happened.

The next day in the library, destiny finally punched the time-card.

The college library, usually used for three main activities—sleeping, pretending to read, and hiding from teachers—was unexpectedly charged with romance. Sister Rosy, the librarian, was already dozing off in her chair, holding a copy of *Premchand* upside down. Perfect conditions for love to flourish.

Nitin entered as if he were starring in a slow-motion romantic entry shot. He tried to walk gracefully, but his cycle-riding swagger didn't really translate to floor tiles, so it looked more like he was avoiding stepping on invisible snakes.

Gita was already there, pretending to read Guide to Elementary Algebra, which was hilarious because she had taken Arts. But one must choose the right prop for the scene.

They sat across from each other. Nobody spoke. Nobody blinked. A silence so loaded that if someone dropped a pen, it would sound like a gunshot.

Nitin tried to say something profound and romantic. What actually came out was:

"So... library."

Gita nodded as if he had uttered the philosophy of the universe.

"Yes. Library," she replied, equally intense.

They both stared at the table. Nitin remembered something from films—heroes always talk about weather. So, he tried:

"It's... hot today."

Gita smiled, which practically felt like *Kabhi Kabhi Mere Dil* Mein started playing in the background—except in reality, someone outside was yelling at a chai-wallah, "*Extra sugar mat daal!"*

Finally, Gita slid a notebook toward him. On the page she had written:

"I like you."

Nitin, feeling bold, wrote back:

"I also."

And underlined also twice, for dramatic impact.

Nitin lingered near the poetry section, pretending to examine a shelf but secretly rehearsing a dozen ways to say something that wouldn't sound ridiculous. His heart thumped like a tabla on a caffeine rush.

"So... uh," he mumbled, glancing at Gita. "I heard... There's a new cinema hall in Kanpur. Cushioned seats... and, um, they sell... popcorn. Imported, I think. Fancy stuff."

Gita raised an eyebrow, half amused, half curious.

"And, uh..." Nitin tripped over his words like they were scattered books on the floor. "*Ek Duje Ke Liye* is playing. I thought... maybe... if you'd like... we could... watch it?"

Gita blinked, cheeks-tinged pink. She fiddled with a bookmark, glanced at the titles around her, and whispered, "I... I guess we could."

Nitin felt like the shelf had just turned into a red carpet. He tried to act casual, pretending to read a book, but his knees wobbled and he knocked a stack of novels over.

The librarian gave him a death glare. Nitin froze—but Gita's shy smile made him feel like he'd just discovered aliens on Mars.

They looked at each other and smiled. A simple, awkward, pure smile.

Outside, life continued—gutkha vendors spat, rickshaw horns blared, the world moved.

But inside the library, for a brief moment, Kanpur had its own love story.

After the library meeting, Nitin floated back to the college courtyard like a man who had just discovered gravity is optional. His friends spotted him immediately—because his face was glowing in a way only someone experiencing first love or high fever glows.

"Well?" Mukesh asked, arms crossed like a strict school principal.

“She said yes for a movie date,” Nitin said, voice trembling like a tabla roll.

For one full second, everyone froze.

Then chaos.

A small crowd of boys started clapping as if the Indian cricket team just won a match. Someone whistled. Another yelled, “Finally a couple in this college who aren't imaginary!”

It was official. Nitin had become a legend.

But legends face problems too.

“What are you going to wear?” Raju asked, looking Nitin up and down. His shirt looked like it had survived a flood, two dust storms, and possibly a Holi celebration.

Nitin sighed. “I don’t have anything decent.”

Mukesh gasped—the dramatic kind.

He dragged Nitin to the boys’ hostel room, opened his Godrej almirah, and pulled out The Shirt. The one he bought last festival season using six months of saved allowance. It was white, crisp, and still smelled like saree shop perfume.

“I was supposed to wear this at my cousin’s engagement,” Mukesh said, with the seriousness of a man donating an organ.

“But, my friend, what is family compared to love?”

He placed the shirt in Nitin’s hands slowly, reverently—like a father giving away his daughter at a wedding. Everyone in the

room got emotional. Someone actually dropped a tear, maybe two or maybe three. Numbers don't matter,emotions do.

Nitin, speechless, nodded. “I will take care of it like my own life.”

“You better,” Mukesh said. “If she rejects you, at least return the shirt ironed.”

Then came the Gift Problem.

“So, lover boy,” Raju said, “you need to take her something. Girls like gifts.”

Silence. Heavy silence.

This was new territory. None of them had ever been anywhere near romance. Their expertise began at cricket and ended at cheap noodles from the campus canteen.

“What do college couples give each other?” Nitin asked.

“Books?”

“No, that looks like homework.”

“Perfume?”

“We can’t afford even the cap of a perfume bottle.”

“Jewellery?”

“Sure, if someone can mortgage a kidney.”

Just when they were about to give up, Mukesh snapped his fingers.

“A rose,” he declared. “Simple. Classic. Bollywood-approved.”

Finally, something achievable.

Except… Nitin checked his pocket. Three rupees and some lint.

The movie tickets alone would cost nearly everything he had. The samosas would require delicate financial engineering. The mysterious popcorn? Forget it.

That’s when true friendship arrived.

One by one, his friends placed their weekly pocket money into his hand. Coins, small notes, all of it. Tiny contributions with enormous heart.

And right then began the collection drive.

Mukesh put his hand over his heart. “I will contribute two rupees.”

Raju: “One rupee fifty.”

Shyam: “Fifty paise is all I have, but take it. It’s for love.”

Coins clinked like donations at a temple.

And in small towns, love is funded by friendship.

Finally, they had enough for a small bouquet of three roses tied with silver ribbon.

Not fancy. Not dramatic.

But real.

And in that moment, Nitin realized something:

In small towns, love stories are never just between two people.

They belong to everyone who believes in them.

Meanwhile, across town, Gita was no less shaken by the library moment. The second she reached the hostel garden; her friends surrounded her like investigative journalists who smelled a scandal.

"So?? What happened??" "Tell us!" "Did he at least look nervous? Nervous boys are adorable."

Gita tried to act casual, flipping open her notebook. "He just asked... you know... for a movie."

"A movie," Mala repeated in slow-motion, like she was narrating a national tragedy. "A movie date. This is not just a step. This is The Step."

Gita pressed her lips together to hide her smile. But the smile was strong. It broke through. Everyone squealed.

Then came The Wardrobe Crisis.

"What will you wear?" one of them demanded, as though this choice would be recorded in history textbooks.

Gita looked at her clothes in her mind—few salwar suits, lots of ordinary ones, nothing grand.

Mala placed her hand on her shoulder with the solemnity of a saint. "Wear the pink salwar suit with the little flowers. It

makes you look like you have just stepped out of a poem. Also, it brings a glow. You need glow."

"Yes," the others agreed unanimously, like a parliament that for once reached consensus.

Then the conversation took a dramatic turn.

Anita leaned closer and whispered like a spy delivering classified intelligence. "I heard... that in cinema halls... when it gets dark... boys try to kiss."

Gita's eyes widened. "No!"

"Yes," Anita said, nodding with absolute seriousness. "It happens in Bombay movies. And if it happens in Bombay movies, it eventually reaches Kanpur. Like everything. Globalization is real".

The group nodded. This logic was irrefutable.

"Listen," Maya said, adjusting her glasses like a moral advisor. "If he tries to hold your hand, that's okay. Cute. Romantic. Like those slow songs."

"But if he tries to kiss," Anita cuts in, raising her finger like a judge passing a verdict, "then remember—he is not Rishi Kapoor. He is Prem Chopra. Villain. You push him away."

Everyone nodded. Even the birds on the nearby tree looked like they agreed.

Gita buried her face in her palms, both mortified and delighted. "I don't think he'll do anything like that."

Her friends exchanged looks. “They never think,” Mala sighed dramatically, “and then- boom - cinema - darkness. Destiny changes.”

Gita laughed despite herself. Her stomach fluttered. She wondered if holding hands would really be as magical as the movies showed—like two hearts communicating through fingertips.

That night, she laid out the pink suit, smoothed its fabric, and looked into the mirror.

Maybe she wasn’t Neetu Singh.

But today, she would allow herself to feel like she could be.

The next day arrived with the dramatic intensity of a Bollywood climax. Nitin was ready two hours before the actual time. He had ironed Mukesh’s prized Diwali shirt three times—once for smoothness, once for reassurance, and once because he didn’t trust fate. Mukesh stood beside him, emotionally watching his shirt become part of history. It was their version of sending a soldier to war.

Nitin stuffed the bouquet inside a generic shopping bag so no neighbourhood aunty would have reason to start a gossip chain ending in, “We saw Nitin giving flowers to a girl and now society is finished.”

Across town, Gita emerged from her home in her pink suit, looking like spring had taken human form. She’d worn her new perfume too, though she had sprayed it so timidly that only

angels could smell it. She walked out with her friends because in Kanpur, a girl walking alone was rarer than winter snowfall.

Nitin waited in the next lane, surrounded by his friends like an actor surrounded by his PR team. The moment Gita and her friends appeared, both groups slowed, stared, then—like well-trained backup dancers—faded away to the sides. It was the most dramatic separation since *Devdas* but with more nervous sweating.

Nitin and Gita took a rickshaw—yes, a rickshaw—to the cinema hall. In Kanpur, that counted as luxury transportation. Mercedes what ?

They sat stiffly, side-by-side, the rickshaw rocking like a cradle made of pure awkwardness. Gita kept her head down, staring at her dupatta like it contained government secrets. Finally, Nitin gathered all courage available in Northern India and said:

"You look... beautiful."

He gave her the roses (kept inside the bag ofcourse)

Gita's cheeks turned the exact shade of her pink suit. "Thank you," she whispered, and the rickshaw wheels might as well have turned into clouds.

They reached the new cinema hall—complete with cushioned seats (civilization!) and a canteen that sold samosas and something called popcorn, which had recently migrated from foreign lands to Indian snack culture.

Nitin bought the tickets, trying to look like a man who did this often. Spoiler: He did not.

The hall darkened*; Ek Duuje Ke Liye* began.

There was an awkwardness between them but when the hero and heroine fell in love on screen and exchanged vows to remain together in life and death, Nitin and Gita felt its reel turning real and vice versa. Slowly—very slowly—Nitin's hand inched toward hers. Gita remembered her friends' warnings. Hold hands = acceptable romance. Kiss attempt = villain.

Nitin gently placed his hand over hers.

No kiss attempt followed.

Gita relaxed. Safe. He is still Rishi Kapoor, not Prem Chopra.

During the interval, Nitin stood up, cleared his throat like a patriarch providing for his family, and purchased samosas, Coca-Cola, and—after wincing at the price—one small popcorn. It cost enough to fund a minor political rally, but this was romance. Romance always exceeds budget.

They sat again, sharing samosas and shy glances. Their fingers brushed. Their shoulders touched once. Neither pulled away.

For the first time, the movie didn't feel like something was happening on screen.

It felt like something was happening to them.

When the film ended and the hall lights came on, Nitin and Gita found themselves blinking, as though waking up from a

shared dream. Their fingers, which had dared to hold each other in the darkness, instantly snapped apart like criminals abandoning evidence. In Kanpur, holding hands in public was considered only slightly less scandalous than robbing a bank.

They stepped out of the cinema, pretending to focus intensely on their own shoes. Yet both of them smiled—those helpless, involuntary smiles that happen only when the world briefly feels kinder than usual.

Outside, the sun was still warm, the street still crowded, the auto drivers still yelling creatively—but everything felt a shade softer. That's the magic of first love. It doesn't change the world—just repaints it.

Nitin checked his pocket. He had exactly enough money left for one rickshaw ride. Just one. If Gita lived even ten meters further, he would have had to push the rickshaw manually.

They sat in the rickshaw again—still shy, still glowing. The ride back was quieter, but not the awkward kind. This was the soft, meaningful silence—the kind where everything had already been said without words.

They reached the same street where their tiny epic had started. And there, positioned perfectly like supporting actors who had rehearsed all night for a two-second shot, stood their friends — waiting as if Nitin and Gita had just stepped off a returning ISRO spacecraft.

Both groups walked toward each other slowly — everyone pretending to be calm while internally bursting like cracked pressure cookers.

"Bye," Gita whispered, eyes down, tucking a shy strand of hair behind her ear like an old Doordarshan heroine.

"Bye," Nitin replied, trying to sound casual and failing adorably.

Before heading off, they agreed to meet at the park the next day.

She drifted away with her friends, as delicate as a flower carried off by a gentle breeze.

The moment she turned the corner, her friends exploded like Diwali crackers set off by enthusiastic neighbourhood kids.

"So?" Mukesh asked, raising one eyebrow in his finest budget-Amitabh style.

"So?" Nitin echoed, trying not to grin.

Chotu leaned forward, eyes gleaming.

"Firstly — DID YOU TRY THE POPCORN PROPERLY? I need flavour notes. Texture. Emotional impact."

Nitin laughed.

"It was... crunchy," he said.

Chotu shut his eyes dramatically.

"My God... this is how joy tastes."

Raju slapped his knee. “Forget popcorn! Tell us — did you hold her hand?”

Nitin turned red instantly. Answer delivered.

The boys erupted like a cricket crowd hearing a last-ball six on radio.

Mukesh hugged him like a proud father.

“Our boy has crossed oceans! Climbed Everest! Touched an actual female hand willingly! Statues will be carved!”

Chotu sighed like a poet. “So this is what growing up looks like.”

Nitin shook his head, smiling at their madness.

“Well… yeah. We just held hands. That’s all.”

“No kiss?” Chotu asked, disappointed like someone opening an exam envelope.

“NO!” Nitin shouted so loudly a couple of cyclists turned.

Mukesh smacked Chotu’s head lightly.

“You idiot, this is Kanpur. If you try kissing, four uncles will drag you by the ear, one aunty will call your parents, and the whole neighbourhood will gossip about you till 1995.”

They laughed so hard even the Banyan leaves trembled.

Meanwhile — Gita & Her Girl Gang.

Gita sat with her friends under a peepal tree on the other end of campus. Mala held her hand like she was checking her pulse.

"Tell us everything," Mala demanded.

"Everything-everything," another said, eyebrows dancing like filmi sidekicks.

Gita lowered her gaze and smiled — the kind of smile that made poets quit their jobs.

Collective gasps.

One friend fanned herself dramatically.

Another clutched her heart as though struck by a radio melodrama.

"Well?? WELL??" Mala insisted.

"Is he Rishi Kapoor... or Prem Chopra?" another teased.

Gita hid her face behind her dupatta. "We held hands," she confessed softly.

The girls shrieked loud enough to scare pigeons out of nearby branches.

"That means he's not Prem Chopra," Mala announced wisely. "Pure Rishi Kapoor material."

Everyone nodded seriously, like judges in a singing competition.

"And he didn't try to kiss you?"

“No.”

“Good. Boys who wait are steady. Boys who rush are like fuse wires — one spark and full trouble.”

Gita laughed until her sides hurt.

Two People, One Thought

Both groups, though apart, shared the same warm disbelief —

That something so tiny — a held hand, a shy smile — could tilt the whole universe for a moment.

The clouds hovered quietly.

The wind whispered through the trees.

Kanpur didn’t realize it yet — but something lovely had begun.

Back with the boys, the grilling continued.

“So?”

“So??”

Mukesh leaned in dramatically. “Decided the next meeting?”

Nitin nodded, and the boys celebrated as though India had won the World Cup again, even without a television to watch it on.

And that was that.

No filmi poses. No dramatic speeches. Just two young hearts walking on different streets, and two friend circles celebrating like it was their own personal victory.

In that small corner of Kanpur, something gentle took root.

Something sweet.

Something real.

The kind of first love people remember long after the city changes.

The demand for a party was immediate, unanimous, and delivered with such authority that Nitin felt like he had been summoned to the High Court of Friendship.

"*Party toh banti hai*," Raju declared — though none of them actually spoke Hindi that dramatically; the tone carried the meaning. The decree had been issued.

Chotu nodded vigorously, still thinking about popcorn. The boy was spiritually invested in the texture of popcorn now. It had changed him.

Nitin opened his palms helplessly. "But I don't have any money left. I spent everything on tickets and samosas and... and that popcorn was criminally overpriced."

Mukesh placed a hand on Nitin's shoulder like a disappointed elder brother. "So now that you have become a lover boy, we are cast aside? You are a miser. A stingy man. A kanjoos."

Nitin froze. In Kanpur, being called stingy is equivalent to being labelled socially unworthy. You could survive rumours about failing exams or having dandruff — but not this.

"A party will happen," he declared, dignity trembling but present. "Tonight. 6 PM. Our adda."

That settled it. They dispersed like a five-man Mafia deciding to regroup after sunset.

THE MONEY QUEST

Nitin went home. He didn't know how to ask for money. But survival instincts are powerful.

He approached his mother in the kitchen, where she was making tea.

"Ma... I need some money," he said innocently. "The college has introduced... extra practice tests." He didn't know what that meant, but it sounded serious.

His mother gave him the look the way mothers do — the I know you're lying but let's see where this goes look. But she handed him the money anyway. Because mothers are the CEOs of compassion.

"Don't waste it," she warned.

"I won't," he promised.

He already knew he probably would.

THE PARTY COUNCIL OF GREAT DECISIONS

At 6, everyone gathered behind the city park where no respectable adult went unless they were hiding something. This was the boys' headquarters — a sacred ground of useless conversations, cricket tactics, and future plans that never made sense.

"So," Raju began, "what kind of party is this?"

"Something epic," Mukesh replied. "Something worthy of the first girlfriend in our friend circle. A celebration of evolution."

Chotu raised his hand like it was a classroom. "Should we get samosas?"

Raju looked at him with pity. "Chotu, we are grown up now. Samosas are for school picnics. We need something... manly."

Nitin immediately sensed trouble.

Raju leaned forward, lowering his voice dramatically: "Beer."

Silence fell like a monsoon.

Beer. The forbidden fruit. The adult juice. The doorway to manhood (according to teenagers who know nothing).

Everyone looked at each other.

Everyone knew this was a terrible idea.

Everyone wanted to do it anyway.

"But who will buy it?" Nitin asked.

All heads turned to Mukesh.

“Why always me?” he sighed. “becuase I am the only one with a moustache?”

Well… yes. That was exactly why.

Mukesh, our brave Hanuman — carrying out missions no one else dared — marched to the liquor shop.

THE SECLUDED CEREMONY OF BECOMING MEN

He returned like a war hero — four bottles of beer clinking inside a black polybag. He had also smuggled two cigarettes and a packet of spicy peanuts because he was a man of vision.

They relocated to the abandoned factory yard near the railway track — the safest place from judgmental uncles, priests, teachers, and distant relatives who always appeared at the worst times.

They sat in a circle.

The bottle was opened with the sacred PSSHHH sound — a sound that felt like rebellion and adulthood mixed with stupidity.

Nitin took the first sip.

He coughed.

Then choked.

Then coughed more.

His eyes watered like he had watched a tragic Bollywood climax.

“It tastes like… medication,” he wheezed.

Mukesh nodded. "Yes. Painkiller mixed with wet socks."

Rest followed despite the alien taste.

Because this wasn't about taste.

It was about togetherness.

About brotherhood.

About proving to themselves that they could step into adulthood without knowing the directions.

Shyam lit a cigarette and coughed like tuberculosis patients.

Chotu also inhaled and immediately demanded water, oxygen, and possibly divine intervention.

They laughed.

They teased Nitin —

"So? Did you hold her hand like a gentleman, or like Prem Chopra?"

"Did your heart race like *Ek Duje Ke Liye* or like an exam results day?"

They laughed.

They teased.

They celebrated.

It was messy.

It was stupid.

It was perfect.

Because in that secluded corner — four friends felt infinite.

And that is what youth is

The party eventually dissolved not with any grand ending, but with the kind of lazy, content warmth that follows first friendship victories. They were all a little tipsy — not drunk enough to lose balance, but just enough to walk a bit slower, talk a bit softer, and feel strangely poetic about life. One by one, the boys headed home, promising to meet the next afternoon with the same solemn sincerity with which world leaders sign peace treaties.

Meanwhile, across town, Gita was at her home — only her intoxication came from something much sweeter. She was smiling. Not the polite smile one gives to neighbours or relatives, but the uncontrollable, helpless kind that keeps appearing no matter how you try to suppress it. Her cheeks kept rising on their own like they had joined a union and declared independence.

Her mother immediately noticed while serving dinner.

"Why are you smiling like that?" she asked, narrowing her eyes with the suspicion only mothers naturally possess.

Gita blinked rapidly, searching for a socially acceptable excuse. "Mala... told me a joke," she lied, though she couldn't remember a single joke Mala had told in her entire lifetime. But it worked. Mothers understand girl-circle laughter as a phenomenon that needs no further questioning.

After dinner, she went to her room — a small cozy space she shared with her younger sister, who was already lying on bed doing absolutely nothing but still acting like she was doing something important.

Gita sat down quietly, but the smile remained. It was the kind of smile that glows from the chest outward, like warmth rising from tea after the first sip. Her sister looked at her suspiciously.

"What is wrong with you?" the sister asked, annoyed.

"Nothing," Gita said softly.

"You're smiling. It's weird."

"I'm just... happy," she admitted, though she wasn't ready to explain happiness in words. How could she? How does one explain the feeling of a boy gently holding your hand in the dark and not letting go, yet not trying to go further? How do you describe a heart beating just a little faster in all the right ways?

Her sister groaned dramatically and turned to the wall. Sisters are trained in irritation from birth.

Gita moved to the window and looked up. The moon was full — large and soft and silver, like something out of an old song. She watched it with the gentle awe of someone experiencing their first true romance — the kind that feels both cinematic and painfully real.

Across the city, on the terrace of his home, Nitin was lying on a thin mattress under the open sky. The beer buzz had

faded, leaving a light and floaty calm behind. He was also looking at the moon — not because he was thinking in poetry, but because the moon was the only thing in the sky that looked how he felt.

Soft. Bright. Full.

He wondered if she might also be looking.

And of course, she was.

Two silhouettes under different rooftops.

Two hearts in the same scene.

A love story still so young, it didn't even know it had begun.

The next morning arrived softly, like someone whispering instead of speaking. A thin layer of clouds covered Kanpur's sky, muting the sun into a gentle pale disc. It wasn't gloomy — just quiet, the kind of weather that makes hearts feel like warm cups of tea.

Nitin woke up with a smile that didn't match his slight headache. The previous evening's beer had been his first, and now his body felt like a rusty bicycle that had run over a speed breaker. Yet his heart was feather-light. He lay on his terrace cot, blinking at the ceiling, replaying the movie date scene like a film reel projected inside his eyelids.

Her pink salwar.

Her shy smile.

The way her fingers trembled the moment he held her hand.

And that little “Thank you” she said when he complimented and gave her the flowers. He wanted to walk to her house right now and relive the moment again — but then police complaints and neighbourhood aunties existed.

He sat up and stretched. A breeze passed through the neem tree, scattering a few leaves, like nature giving slow applause to first love.

Downstairs, his mother was kneading dough.

“You’re smiling,” she said, half-suspicious, half-amused.

“No, no, it’s just a good morning,” Nitin said quickly, grabbing his toothbrush.

“Hmm,” she narrowed her eyes, “When boys smile for no reason, there is always a reason.”

He choked on the toothpaste foam.

Meanwhile, across the city, Gita was brushing her hair in front of the mirror in her small shared bedroom. Her sister sat on the bed, looking at her like one studies a suspicious scientific experiment.

“You are smiling again,” her sister said.

“No I am not,” Gita replied, combing faster.

“Yes you are. Your cheeks are blushing like you stole someone’s ladoos.”

Gita threw the hair comb at her, which her sister caught and cackled at like a villain sidekick.

She picked out the pink salwar and folded it neatly, treating it like a sacred relic. First date outfit. Preserved forever. She wasn't sure if she should wear it again soon, or never again to keep the magic intact.

Last night she lied to her mother about laughing at Mala's joke. But she wasn't laughing. She was... glowing. She remembered how Nitin's voice trembled a little when he spoke. She remembered his hands, warm and careful, afraid to do anything wrong. And the way he looked at her when she said goodbye outside the cinema.

She traced circles on the windowsill.

The clouds made everything feel slow, romantic, like the world was holding its breath.

Campus — The Day After First Love

By afternoon, both of them headed to campus—naturally in separate directions, because Kanpur society would faint otherwise. The clouds lingered above, cooling the air with a soft sweetness. Once classes ended, they drifted toward the park to meet—again separately, because that's how peace in Kanpur is maintained.

The park was not exactly a park—at least not by any city standard. It was a patch of grass trying its best to grow among dust, a few heroic trees, and a fountain that hadn't worked since the India vs West Indies match of '83 (according to local historians, mostly rickshaw drivers). But still, for Nitin and Gita, this was their Switzerland. Every love story needs a scenic

location, and this one had the fountain-without-water and a bench dedicated to “Pintu + Dolly Forever”.

They said “Hi” to each other and sat on that bench—side by side—but not too side by side. This was Kanpur. The gap of three inches between their elbows was not just a gap; it was a boundary of civilization, the moral wall that protected society from instant collapse. Still, the air around them felt warm and soft, like the world was quietly smiling.

They had now crossed that initial stage where both forgot how to speak in the presence of the other. They could talk now—carefully, shyly, like people learning to walk on ice.

“So,” Nitin began, pretending to pluck a leaf, which wasn't even there. “Where were you before joining college here?”

Gita tucked a strand of hair behind her ear—a gesture that had begun to haunt Nitin in his dreams. “My father is in a government job,” she said. “He gets transferred every few years. Before Kanpur, we lived in Assam.”

Nitin stared like she had said she lived on the moon.

“Assam? Like... really Assam? With real tea gardens? Green everywhere?”

“Yes,” she smiled, amused at his awe. “We lived near tea plantations. They were just normal for us.”

Nitin shook his head slowly, the way saints do when they witness divine truth.

"You've lived in places that people see only on calendar posters."

Gita laughed softly.

"And you?" she asked.

Nitin sighed dramatically, looking up at the sky as though reciting poetry. "I have lived only in Kanpur. The furthest I've been is Bareilly. And that too because my mother's family lives there. I have not seen the world, Gita. Only the same roads, same people, same samosas."

"Kanpur has its charm," she said.

"Yes," he nodded seriously. "Kanpur has me."

Gita laughed, covering her mouth. That laugh was soft, like the sound a heart makes when it blushes.

Then she asked, "What do you want to do after college?"

This question. This was the question.

Nitin straightened his back. His eyes shone with the flame of every filmi dream he'd carried since childhood.

"I want to be a film hero."

Gita blinked. "A hero? Like... the hero hero?"

"Yes," he said with conviction. "Not the friend. Not the uncle. Not the dying brother. The hero. The one who runs in slow motion with open arms. The one who delivers dialogues in rain. The one who jumps from a cliff—not because he has to—but because it looks cool. That hero."

Gita tried to hold her laughter, but it escaped. And then, seeing his seriousness, she stopped and looked at him carefully—the boy with dreams larger than the town that held him.

"And after college...?" she asked softly.

"I will go to Bombay," he said. "I will try. Even if I fail, I want to say I tried."

There was silence.

Not awkward—just full.

Gita's eyes softened. "You know... for me... you already are a hero."

Nitin forgot how to breathe.

His ears turned red. His heart threw a party inside his ribcage. Angels somewhere played violins. The fountain, after 30 years, almost worked.

He didn't know what to say. So he just smiled—shy, crooked, and beautiful.

They sat like that a while—three inches apart but closer than ever—watching the leaves shimmer in the breeze.

A pigeon landed near their feet, pecked something invisible, and walked away. Even the pigeon seemed to understand that some moments are holy.

In that small, dusty park in Kanpur—without background music, without slow motion, without scripted dialogues—something real, gentle, and warm had begun.

First love. The simplest, purest miracle in the world.

And so began the golden era of Nitin's life — or what he believed was his golden era anyway, because everything looks golden when your brain is lightly sautèed in cannabis fumes.

His days rolled by like slow-motion scenes from a 90s music video. College with Gita was a blur of cafeteria chai (which always tasted like someone had boiled water and whispered "milk" into it from a distance), strolls in the local park where couples pretended crows were nightingales, and the occasional movie date where they always arrived fifteen minutes late but still complained about missing "the best part" as if they had ever known what the best part was.

Evenings belonged to the adda with friends.

Not a place you'd find on maps. Maps had standards.

The adda lived behind the old railway godown — near a tree that looked like it was photosynthesizing out of pure spite. A location protected from society by tall grass, bad lighting, and the eternal shame of unattended trash.

Here, beer was the reigning monarch.

Beer, according to the boys, was the greatest invention of humankind after the wheel. They had a theory that civilization advanced in three steps: wheel → beer → everything else. They

even suspected ancient humans invented agriculture only to ensure regular supply of barley. Truly, historians had been missing the point for centuries.

But then came The Day of The Packet.

Chotu arrived with the expression of a man who had either discovered the cure for all human misery or figured out how to get a ration card renewed in under one attempt. He produced a crumpled paper packet and unfolded it with priestly reverence.

Inside—

a handful of leaves that looked exactly like the coriander used to garnish bad Maggi.

Nitin squinted.

"What... is that?"

Chotu cleared his throat, shoulders rising as though he were about to announce the final answer in a quiz show.

"Marijuana.

Elixir of the gods."

Silence.

The wind rustled.

A nearby crow coughed judgmentally.

Chotu continued, warming to his sermon:

"Gentlemen, behold — not an invention. A discovery. Like fire. Beer is like the wheel, a man-made invention, but this is

fire, created by God and discovered by humanity. Both were important for human civilization but God always has an upper hand, of course—" he pointed at the coriander-shaped destiny, "—this is God's personal contribution to human happiness."

They stared at him, unsure whether to be impressed or concerned.

Mukesh frowned.

"So what now? We become sages? Grow beards? Start dispensing wisdom under banyan trees? Also isn't this illegal? And above all, how the hell to take it?"

Chotu puffed up like a patriotic pigeon.

"First of all, this is sacred. Mentioned in ancient scriptures. Sadhus have been having holy communion with this plant while the rest of the world was still trying to invent language beyond pointing at a cave and grunting".

This was shocking mostly because no one was aware Chotu could speak more than eight consecutive intelligent words. It was like discovering your kitchen tap suddenly dispenses Shakespeare.

"Marijuana has been a part of our culture and nobody considered it a taboo and remotely illegal. Then he added, dramatically, "And then as usual America got involved." His voice took on the tragic weight of a man describing the fall of an empire, or worse, the invention of low-fat mayonnaise. "See, marijuana was minding its own business for centuries—meditating, chilling, vibing, being a plant. But Americans...

Americans treat plants the way they treat countries: first they discover it, then they panic about it, then they try to ban it, and finally they sell it back in a fancier package with a logo and a jingle."

He pointed upward like he was giving the moon a lecture. "They banned it there. And we—being very obedient and very concerned about looking sophisticated internationally—banned it here too. Because apparently if America sneezes, we are supposed to get pneumonia."

He leaned back, satisfied with the weight of his own wisdom.

"It's like banning grass because cows look too happy. It makes no sense."

Tell me—" he pointed at the sky like he was presenting a courtroom argument in front of the sun, "—how do you ban something that grows from the earth itself? Are we banning soil now? Air? Oxygen?"

This was, without question, the most philosophical moment of Chotu's life. If Socrates' spirit was floating around looking for a medium, it had chosen Chotu ironically.

But unfortunately, none of this helped answer the real question:

How the hell do you smoke it?

They had only ever seen sadhus using chillums. Chillums, however, were not readily available. Chillums did not magically appear if you clapped twice like fairy godmothers.

Then Mukesh — guided entirely by films, questionable instinct, and the blind confidence of a man with no backup plan — had a revelation.

"Wait. I've seen this in a movie.

He emptied a cigarette with such intense concentration that anyone watching would have assumed he was splitting nucleus from the atom rather than preparing to get mildly intoxicated.

He crushed the marijuana with textbook-level seriousness, mixed it with tobacco like he was seasoning a particularly philosophical omelette, and rolled it back together.

The cigarette now resembled something battered in a small street fight, but it lived.

One puff.

Two.

Three.

The universe tilted.

The world developed a slight spin, like a ceiling fan installed by a lazy electrician.

Chotu, eyes wide, declared,

"I am three puffs away from enlightenment."

Mukesh, lying flat on his back, whispered,

"The stars... they're performing a private show. For me. Exclusively."

And Nitin—

Nitin felt alive.

Not the regular alive.

Cosmic alive.

Like-his-heart-had-learned-geometry alive.

The boys sat in perfect silence, staring at nothing while experiencing everything.

Local men.

Global philosophers.

Backyard mystics.

Marijuana became the economically responsible intoxication, replacing beer like a younger, smarter political candidate.

Marijuana soon became the financially responsible choice of intoxication — like switching from a rickshaw to a bicycle because both take you places, but one doesn't charge meter fare.

Beer was still loved, of course. They would never betray beer. Beer had history. Beer had sentiment. Beer had been there when they first learned that life is mostly confusing and adults are just taller children.

But marijuana... marijuana was cheaper, stronger, and came with philosophical side-effects.

And thus they evolved — from "Kanpur colony boys with nothing to do" to "Kanpur's backyard philosophers shaping the destiny of absolutely no one."

Their discussions changed overnight.

What used to be:

"Bhai, Sharma ji's daughter ran away with her tutor."

became:

"Bhai... is love real, or just a chemical scam created by the brain to trick us into reproducing?"

What used to be:

"Yaar, we should pass the semester."

became:

"Yaar... semester is an illusion. What is time? Who invented time? And why?"

Their adda behind the railway godown became the Harvard of hopelessness — the Oxford of Overthinking — the IIT of Irrelevant Intellectualism.

And the topics?

Oh, the topics were legendary:

If Hitler had won World War II, would everyone be forced to keep a mustache? And would salons offer 'Hitler Cut — ₹3 Extra'?

Do souls exist or humans are simply made of stardust, and does that mean we are basically glitter with anxiety?

Did Neil Armstrong really land on the moon or was it just America's attempt to win a neighborhood bragging contest? Because honestly, those camera angles looked like someone forgot to focus the lens.

Is the Soviet Union okay?

(There was always one guy who said, "Bro, I think it's going through something.")

They would sit there, high as the Indian economy's expectations, nodding like saints, staring into the void, uncovering truths that would change absolutely nothing in their lives.

No exams were passed. No life decisions improved. No enlightenment occurred.

But the confidence?

Astronomical.

They truly believed that if someone televised their adda talks, the world would become a better place. Or worse. But definitely more entertaining.

Saints of Kanpur. Thinkers of Things That Did Not Matter. Philosophers of the Unemployment Future.

Guided by the Holy Herb.

And then came the night when Dhruv Kumar was born.

It was a winter night when Nitin and his friend Mukesh were smoking joints under the starry sky

And then came the night — the night when history (or at least two very high Kanpur boys) would be remembered as the Birth of Dhruv Kumar.

Winter evening.

Terrace.

Some holy herb.

Stars shining like someone had polished them with Surf Excel.

The city below murmuring its usual soundtrack of scooter horns, pressure cooker whistles, and a distant uncle coughing for dramatic effect.

Just Nitin and Mukesh.

Two prophets of the cosmos, if the cosmos was slightly hazy and smelled like burnt leaves.

They lay there, brains floating somewhere five inches above their skulls — the scientifically precise altitude of philosophical stupidity.

Nitin exhaled, slowly, like he was releasing the secrets of the universe or just trying not to choke.

First came the serious discussions.

“How Hitler could have won the war if Germany didn’t invade the USSR,” Nitin declared, with the confidence of someone who once barely passed history.

Mukesh nodded, wise and glassy-eyed.

“And if Japan didn’t attack Pearl Harbor,” he added, because international geopolitics comes free with every joint.

Then the conversation drifted — as it always does — into the “meaning of life,” the “origin of the universe,” and whether pigeons have feelings or are just pretending.

Once they had solved everything philosophers had been debating for thousands of years (in about 14 minutes), Nitin finally arrived at the question festering in his soul:

“Mukesh… do you think I can become a hero?”

Mukesh did not laugh.

He did not smirk.

He simply nodded — very slowly — like a saint giving blessings at a religious sermon performed entirely by hallucinations.

“You,” he said, voice heavy with cosmic authority,

“were the greatest Lord Ram our town has ever seen.”

And he meant it.

He said it with the sincerity of a man who once cried when Nitin adjusted his headgear in Ramleela.

Nitin smiled… then paused.

“But… Nitin Tiwari,” he said, face scrunched, “sounds like someone who tells people, ‘Attach two photocopies and come tomorrow.’”

Mukesh inhaled.

This was serious.

Identity-level serious.

Hero-name serious.

Nitin pointed to the sky — dramatically, of course — because weed turns everyone into a poet and a Bollywood director.

“The North Star,” he whispered.

“Dhruv. It stays. Unmoving. Constant. Everything else shifts. But Dhruv is always there. I want to be like that.”

Mukesh sat up like he’d been struck by lightning delivered directly from Mount Olympus.

“Dhruv,” he breathed.

“That… is a hero’s name.”

Silence expanded.

The universe held its breath.

Even the neighborhood dog stopped barking for dramatic effect.

“But,” Mukesh added with the gentle tact of a surgeon delivering bad news,

"Dhruv Tiwari still sounds like a man who keeps ledger books in a government office."

And then — divine intervention.

"Dhruv Kumar."

Classic.

Majestic.

Embossed-on-film-posters energy.

Nitin repeated it to himself like a mantra, tasting it like it was fine wine and not just the aftertaste of burnt tobacco.

"Dhruv Kumar."

The stars glimmered.

The sky nodded.

A cosmic bell dinged.

And somewhere, the real Dhruv Tara glowed a little brighter — or maybe just rolled its celestial eyes and said:

"Well... good luck, buddy."

Because Nitin Tiwari was born 21 years ago.

But that night, on a Kanpur terrace under a slightly suspicious amount of smoke...

Dhruv Kumar was born.

And so time began passing in Nitin's life the way aunties pass compliments—slow, confused, and always slightly judgmental.

His days settled into a sacred three-part routine:

Meet Gita

Exchange shy smiles, share tiny sips of watery chai, pretend the world is poetry.

(It wasn't. It was Kanpur. But love makes even dust look like stardust.)

Smoke up at the adda

Where deep conversations happened, like:

"Do ants have nations?"

"If we are 70% water, shouldn't we pay water tax on ourselves?"

Drink beer once every two weeks

Beer remained the old, loyal friend. The wise uncle of intoxications.

They respected beer.

They never disrespected beer.

Beer was like the wheel — the OG invention.

But marijuana was fire — discovered, divine, destined.

This cycle continued with the smooth efficiency of a government office during lunch break — meaning nothing happened at all, but somehow time flew.

Days blended. Seasons changed. Fashion changed. The USSR did not change so much as disintegrate, but sure.

And suddenly —

College got over.

Just like that.

The universe tapped them all on the shoulder and said:

"Enough philosophy, gentlemen. Time to panic."

THE REALITY RETURNS (UNINVITED)

Mukesh—once philosopher, once cosmic thinker, once smoker of celestial herbs—now carried a stack of government job application forms thick enough to build a house.

He spoke with the seriousness of a retired brigadier:

"I have decided. I will become Clerk, Municipal Corporation Kanpur.

Government job. Salary on time. Fans are always working. Pension at the end.

This is true enlightenment."

His voice trembled like he was announcing his engagement to national stability.

Chotu, the accidental sage, also returned to ancestral duty:

He started sitting at his father's hundred-year-old clothes shop.

The shop specialized in clothes that were fashionable two generations ago — the kind of patterns that make you wonder if someone spilled curry on fabric and called it design.

Chotu now spent his days saying things like:

"Bhiya, this print is vintage. No no, fashion comes back. If you buy this, in 40 years you will thank me."

He had gone from messenger of Shiva's herb to salesman of floral horrors.

Kanpur marched on.

Life expected Nitin to march with it.BUT NITIN (SORRY—DHRUV) HAD OTHER PLANS

See, Nitin was no longer Nitin.

Once upon a high, he had renamed himself Dhruv Kumar — the Eternal Star, the Hero of Destiny, the man whose self-belief was stronger than his mathematics marks (which was not saying much, but still).

He believed — deeply, sincerely, dangerously — that he was meant for something bigger.

Not municipal office tables. Not floral fabric convincing. Not Kanpur's gentle cycle of: birth → tea → job → more tea → death.

Dhruv believed his destiny was Bombay.

Not as a tourist. Not as someone who gets his snacks stolen on the local train. But as a Hero.

A star.

The Dhruv Tara of cinema screens.

Kanpur had given him love.

Kanpur had given him friendship.

Kanpur had given him weed, beer, philosophical delusion, everything.

But Kanpur couldn't give him the spotlight.

And then came the complication shaped like a girl with soft eyes and dangerous innocence:

Gita.In small towns, love has an expiry date known as graduation.

Girls did not get "time to figure life out."

They got "marriage proposals arranged by aunties who had intelligence networks more efficient than R&AW."THE FAMILY CONFERENCE (DISASTER CLASS)

One evening, Dhruv stood before his family.

His father, an honest postal worker who believed in stamps, discipline, and disappointment.

His mother, chopping vegetables with the emotional intensity of someone always ready to cry at short notice.

And his grandfather, wise, wrinkled, and suspiciously silent.

Dhruv took a deep breath.

"I want to go to Bombay," he said.

"I want to become a film hero."

If silence had a sound, this one had the emotional impact of a meteor collision.

His mother immediately began crying in fluent melodrama mode.

No sniffles.

Not tears.

But the kind of wailing that could bring back extinct species.

His father just stared at him like someone discovering their child cannot do basic math.

"A hero?" he finally said.

"A hero? Our family has absolutely no connection to cinema! The closest we ever came was once when Rajesh Khanna (or his driver) asked me for directions in 1970 while shooting in Kanpur. I didn't even speak! I just pointed my finger! That is our entire film history!"

He said this with the pride of a man who has accepted defeat many times, but not like this.

But then—

Grandfather leaned forward.

Everyone looked.

Here was a man who once had dreams too.

In the 1940s, he had wanted to go to Bombay to meet K. L. Saigal.

He had practiced Saigal's songs.

He had saved money.

He had believed.

But then the roof leaked.

Money went to repair tiles.

Dreams went into storage.

By the time he was free again, the world had moved from K. L. Saigal to Baba Sehgal, and he knew destiny had closed the door politely and firmly.

So when Dhruv spoke of Bombay, grandfather recognized something:

The stubborn spark of a man not yet defeated.

He nodded slowly.

"Let him go."

Silence again.

His father looked betrayed.

"Papa! I gave directions to Rajesh Khanna ONCE and you think that qualifies us to send someone to be Rajesh Khanna?!"

Grandfather did not blink.

“He reached the location on time. Directions were correct. Talent runs in the family.”

Even the ceiling fan paused to process that logic.

Dhruv gathered his courage.

“Listen,” he began, pacing like he was delivering sermons to a very disappointed audience.

“Dreams are not supposed to be realistic. If they are realistic, they’re not dreams — they’re grocery lists with emotions.” he said.

The room froze.

His mother paused mid-weeping like her tear ducts got a software update.

His father stopped scratching his head, hand mid-air like someone had hit pause.

Even the ceiling fan slowed down a little as if trying to hear better.

Dhruv continued, gaining confidence like a politician who didn’t know what he was talking about but loved the sound of his own voice:

“Someone once dreamt that humans could fly — and now we have airplanes.

Someone once dreamt that candles are stupid — and now we have electric bulbs.

Someone once dreamt that instant noodles can be cooked in 2 minutes — even though they never actually cook in 2 minutes. But look! We believed it anyway!"

Grandfather nodded vigorously. He had no idea what Dhruv was saying, but it sounded anti-authority, and he respected that.

Dhruv's father opened his mouth to say something, but Dhruv wasn't done. He pointed dramatically at the sky like he was waiting for background music:

"Dreams create reality. Reality does not create dreams. If you only chase what already exists, you are just— participating. I don't want to participate. I want to—"

He had no idea what the end of the sentence was supposed to be.

Silence made it sound deep.

Grandfather leaned forward, whispering, "He is speaking truth."

Dhruv blinked, stunned at his own performance.

He looked around the room, emotionally overwhelmed by his own greatness.

"...I don't know where those words came from," he murmured, eyes slightly moist.

"It's like... it's like the universe is speaking through me."

His father's expression was somewhere between a stroke and waiting for the morning milkman.

His mother, after a respectful silence, resumed crying — but now in a more theatrical, "my son is possessed by cinematic ambition" way.

Grandfather clapped. A slow, solemn clap.

Like he had just witnessed the birth of a poet, a visionary, or someone extremely high.

The dog in the street barked, as if to say, "Even I don't buy this.

But Dhruv stood there, chest expanded, like he had just rewritten philosophy.

Eventually, after endless family debates, emotional background music, and philosophical monologues that could have won Nitin a Filmfare Award, the house finally arrived at a conclusion. Not peacefully, of course — this was an Indian household, not Switzerland.

Nitin's father sat with the heaviness of a man who had aged 14 additional years in just three evenings. His mother looked exhausted from crying so consistently that even professional actresses would have taken notes from her endurance. The grandfather, meanwhile, was sitting in a chair with the pride of a retired freedom fighter watching a revolution unfold.

“At last,” his father said, rubbing his forehead like he was approving a government dam project, “you can go. To Bombay. To become... a hero.”

He said “hero” with the same tone one uses for “circus employee.”

“But,” he added, slowly lifting a single index finger like a judge delivering sentence, “you have five years. If you do not succeed in five years, you return. And you will join the post office when I retire.”

Silence fell. The ceiling fan creaked dramatically, as though providing background score.

Nitin nodded — not like a son agreeing to conditions, but like a warrior accepting a divine quest. Even if the quest involved possibly sorting mail for the rest of his life.

Now came the legendary national trial:

Roti, Kapdaa aur *Makaan.*

Food, Clothes and Shelter — the three-headed monster standing between every Indian and their dreams.

Food was something his father decided to take care of. He said he would give Nitin ₹5,000 when he leaves— real hard-earned savings. Not easily given, not lightly carried. Enough to survive a while, provided Nitin didn’t immediately attempt to eat in restaurants with tablecloths.

The clothes were fine too. Nitin already had a small wardrobe curated by romance, self-respect, and occasional

sale discounts. Clothes bought to look impressive while meeting Gita. Clothes gifted by Gita on birthdays. Clothes he believed made him look like Vinod Khanna, even though they actually made him look like Vinod Khanna's distant neighbor.

Shelter, however — Bombay shelter — that was the real boss level. Rents in Bombay had a personality: ruthless, heartless, and eager to destroy dreams efficiently.

But Mukesh, dependable Mukesh — philosopher of the terrace, spiritual companion of intoxicated nights, patron saint of last-minute solutions — came to the rescue once again.

"My cousin Raju," Mukesh said with pride, "lives in Bombay. He works in films."

This statement carried hope, ambition, and also suspicion.

Because when asked what exactly he did in films, Raju had once replied, "Work. Important work."

Which could mean he was a cameraman.

Or that he held the camera.

Or that he occasionally dusted the camera.

Regardless — Bombay had a couch. That was enough.

Mukesh wrote to Raju. Raju replied, agreeing to let Nitin stay until he figured things out. No promises, no guarantees, just a chance — which was all dreams ever needed.

And like that, the path was set.Not perfect, not stable, but standing — like a three-legged table that somehow still holds tea cups.

Kanpur wasn't behind him yet.

Bombay wasn't ahead of him yet.

He was right in the middle — suspended between the comfort of what he knew and the chaos of what he wanted.

Roti would be managed soon.

Kapdaa was folded in a suitcase that still smelled faintly of Gita's perfume.

Makaan depended entirely on the stamina of cousin-level goodwill.

But before trains, platforms, dreams, and crowded Bombay mornings — there was one more conversation to have.

The most delicate one.

He had to tell Gita.

Tell her that he loved her.

Tell her that he wanted a future with her.

Tell her that his future might be somewhere else.

Tell her that he was going — not to escape her, but to become someone worthy of standing beside her.

He practiced lines in front of the mirror.

He rehearsed sincerity like actors rehearse monologues they hope will change their careers.

But nothing sounded right.

Because how do you tell the person who makes your world feel steady...

that you need to leave the world to steady yourself?

And so, before Bombay could begin—

He had to step into the hardest place first

Meanwhile, on the other side of Kanpur, trouble was brewing in a very different flavor.

Gita had graduated too. And in her house, graduation meant one thing:

Marriage Season.

Not her career.

Not her dreams.

Not even a break.

Marriage.

Her mother had started looking at her not like a daughter, but like a time-sensitive vegetable that must be used before it spoils.

Relatives had begun inspecting her like they were evaluating a vintage radio: "Good condition... hasn't been dropped... speaks politely... suitable for marriage."

Gita tried resisting.

One week she said she had a government exam.

Next week she said she wanted to take a computer course.

Then she said she was considering teaching.

Eventually she ran out of excuses and came dangerously close to saying she wanted to become an astronaut, just to buy time.

But even delay has limits. Especially in a middle-class Kanpur household where "society" is the biggest surveillance agency ever created.

Finally, one evening, cornered between her mom, a tray of samosas, and a matrimonial horoscope, Gita sighed and told the truth.

She told them about Nitin.

Silence.

Silence so heavy that even the ceiling fan slowed down to listen.

Her father's face froze in a way that made it look like he was trying to recall whether he had ever personally committed any sins large enough to deserve this.

Her mother's mouth opened into the perfect shape of a shocked temple bell.

She didn't say anything for ten seconds — a family record.

And then chaos broke loose.

Her mother began wailing like someone had just canceled her ration card.

Her father started pacing like a cricket coach watching a tail-ender bat.

Her younger brother quietly left the room, because this was clearly above his pay grade.

Love marriage in Gita's family was unheard of.

Her mother had seen her husband for the first time on their wedding night, and even then only through a 30% visibility bridal veil.

Emotions were not expressed in this family — they were stored deep inside the kitchen masala boxes.

Love marriage here was as rare as: A polite auto-rickshaw driver agreeing to go by meter.

Her father, flustered beyond comprehension, turned to her mother and declared:

"This is your fault. You raised her like this!"

Which was unfair, because all her mother ever did was tell her to study and not talk to boys... so technically, Gita had followed 50% of the plan.

Her mother, still crying, accused fate, film heroines, college culture, and possibly even the neighbor's daughter for creating a "bad influence."

Someone mentioned "honor."

Someone mentioned “reputation.”

Someone definitely mentioned “What will Gupta Aunty say?”

The house turned into an emotional soap opera without the background music.

Meanwhile, Gita sat there quietly.

Because she knew the truth:

She did love Nitin.

But love alone wasn’t enough, not here.

She didn’t know Nitin’s future.

She didn’t know her own future.

She only knew that letting go of him now would feel like swallowing a stone.

Her parents weren’t villains.

They were just afraid.

Afraid of a future they had never seen.

Afraid of stepping into a world without a map.

And for Gita, that fear was starting to look heavier than love.

Eventually, after all the shouting, pacing, and melodramatic silence, a strange calm settled over Gita’s living room — the kind of calm that only comes when everyone is too exhausted to scream anymore.

Her father sat with his head in his hands, her mother sniffing into the corner of her dupatta, and the ceiling fan resumed its duties, spinning away like it didn't just witness the emotional equivalent of an earthquake.

That's when her mother remembered something.

A memory so profound it froze her mid-sniff.

That's when her mother suddenly froze mid-sniff, eyes widening like she had just spotted a ghost behind Gita's shoulder.

"Do you remember Sharmaji ki beti?" she whispered, voice trembling with the kind of gravity usually reserved for national tragedies and gas cylinder leaks.

Her father's spine straightened.

Oh, he remembered.

How could anyone forget?

Sharmaji's daughter — the legend, the cautionary tale, the warning poster of the entire mohalla.

She had run away for love.

Love-love.

Movie-type-love.

A year later, she returned.

Not alone.

Oh no. She returned with:

A husband who looked permanently confused and nutritionally deficient.

A small baby who cried exactly like the local cat, only louder.

And pockets so empty that even pickpockets felt sorry — some even contemplated slipping a few coins into them out of sheer pity.

They didn't even have enough money for the train ticket back.

Rumor was they came halfway hanging from the luggage compartment like washing drying on a line.

The whole colony had stood at the window grills to watch the dramatic re-entry like it was a new episode of a daily soap.

Sharmaji himself didn't speak to anyone for three months.

Sharmaji's wife pretended the baby was "just visiting."

And the newly-returned couple lived in one room where even the baby's crying echoed in embarrassment.

Gita's mother looked at her daughter now with that same energy — the energy of someone who has seen what love can do if left unsupervised.

Her father's expression said:

I am not ready to become Season 2 of Sharmaji.

That one story had become the neighborhood's version of The Mahabharata — recited during tea, weddings, funerals, and while buying tomatoes.

Gita's mother looked at her daughter now as if she were looking at a ticking bomb.

"Tell us about this boy," her father said, voice heavy, emotionally bruised, but stable.

Gita took a breath.

"His name is Nitin."

They nodded.

"And... what does he do?"

Gita hesitated.

"He wants to be... a hero."

Her parents exchanged glances. Hope flickered.

"Hero?" her father asked.

"As in Hero Company? Motorcycles? Good job! Private sector!"

Her mother brightened. Maybe he worked in the Hero Cycles factory. Stable, respectable, wheels for the future.

"No," Gita said, too honestly for her own safety.

"Hero... as in... movie hero."

Silence.

Absolute silence.

Even the fan seemed to stop in disbelief.

Then:

Her mother beat her chest like she was auditioning for a mythological serial.

Her father made a sound that was half gasp, half sneeze, and full existential dread.

"A film hero! FILM HERO?" he shouted, as if she had confessed to wanting to elope with a traveling magician.

Her mother, face contorted in tragedy, declared,

"This match is not possible. Impossible. Over. Finished. End credits."

But Gita, fueled by love and possibly several hours of weepy cassette songs, stood firm like the final scene of every 80s romance film.

"I will not marry anyone else," she said with actress-level conviction.

This was too much drama for her mother to handle without logistical inquiry.

She dragged Gita into a corner and whispered the most important investigative question of any Indian mother:

"Did you... give yourself to him?"

Gita looked horrified.

"NO! He loves me. Not my body."

This line would've been touching — poetic, even — if not for the underlying reality:

Either Nitin was truly a gentleman,

or

he simply never managed to find a private room in Kanpur.

History may never uncover the truth.

But the immediate truth was this:

Gita needed to see Nitin.

To talk.

To understand what they were supposed to do now that life had officially entered dramatic mode.

So she sent him a message through a common friend, short and urgent:

Meet me. Park. Tomorrow.

Night fell.

And destiny, once again, adjusted its seat and leaned forward to watch.

The next day the park was lazy under the winter sun — the kind of afternoon where even the stray dogs look unemployed by choice.

Nitin was already there, sitting on the same old bench, fidgeting like he had swallowed a tiny phone vibrating on silent mode.

Gita arrived quietly.

She didn't say anything at first, just sat down beside him. The silence between them was not empty — it was full. Full of everything that had happened in the last 24 hours.

"I told my parents," she said finally.

Nitin gulped. "And?"

"They were shocked. And confused. And then shocked again."

Her voice was steady, but her eyes were tired — the tiredness of someone who just survived parent-level emotional warfare.

She looked straight ahead. Not at him. Not at anything. Just ahead.

Then Nitin told her his side — how he spoke to his father, how he explained his dream, how his father agreed to give him five years.

Five years!

That word landed like a slow-moving meteor in the space between them.

Gita's lips trembled just a little.

Five years wasn't a number — it was an unknown universe.

"So you're going," she whispered.

Nitin opened his mouth, then closed it. There was no dramatic line to soften this.

"Yes," he said.

Silence again. The kind where the air feels heavier.

For a moment, she looked like a girl whose whole world had just been reorganized without her permission.

But then — she steadied.

Like someone quietly choosing strength over panic.

"You wanted to be a hero before I came into your life," she said softly.

"And I can't be the reason you let go of that."

Nitin turned to her.

And right then, he wondered —

What good karma did he do in his last lifetime to deserve her?

Because this... this was not ordinary love.

This was the type of love people write songs about and then ruin with terrible remixes.

For a moment — just one — Nitin imagined a different life:

He gives up the dream.

He gets a job.

He marries Gita.

They buy a fridge on EMI.

He grows a small belly.

They go on evening walks discussing onion prices.

It was… peaceful. Nice. Warm.

Too warm.

Like a blanket being tucked around someone who has already stopped breathing.

Gita must have seen the thought flicker in his eyes, because she shook her head gently.

"No," she said.

"If you stay… even if we get married… someday when your job starts choking you, when your boss shouts, when the city feels small — you will look at me and think 'I could have tried.'

And I will look at myself and think 'I stopped him.'

I don't want that."

Nitin didn't say anything.

His throat had decided it didn't want to function.

She continued, voice quiet but fierce:

"Go to Bombay. Try. Fail. Succeed. Whatever happens, happens. If you become a hero, I will happily be a star wife. If you don't… I will still be happy to be your wife."

Nitin's chest felt full — like every emotion he had ever felt was trying to exist at the same time.

He held her hands — carefully — like holding the center of his life.

This wasn't dramatic movie love.

This was love that was trusted.

Gita rested her head on his shoulder.

“This might be our last meeting before you leave,” she whispered.

They didn’t hug like lovers desperate to hold on.

They hugged like departing partners who had already decided they would.

Before they stood up to leave, Gita took his hands again. Not trembling. Not dramatic. Just steady — like someone who knows exactly what she is choosing.

“I’m not asking for promises about the future,” she said softly.

“I don’t care how big you become, or how long it takes. I’ll wait. I’ll handle my parents. I’ll take the gossip, the questions, the doubts — all of it.”

She drew a breath, but her voice didn’t shake.

“I can tolerate distance. I can tolerate uncertainty. I can tolerate waiting,” she said.

“But I cannot tolerate one thing—ever.”

She looked straight into his eyes — not pleading, not threatening — just truthful.

“ Cheating. Be it emotional cheating or physical cheating. If you give your heart or body to someone else... then I won’t be able to stay.”

There was no anger in it.

No melodrama.

Just clarity.

"That's the only thing I ask. Be loyal. Not because I demand it — but because love means nothing without it."

Nitin didn't reply immediately.

He just looked at her — really looked — and wondered what extraordinary good deed he must have done in some previous lifetime to deserve someone like this in the present one.

He felt his throat tighten.

Not from sadness — from awe.

His dream had always felt like a solo journey.

Now it felt like a promise.

He nodded — once — slow, sure, grounded.

Not like a boy agreeing.

Like a man choosing.

Because now Bombay wasn't just a city he wanted to conquer.

It was the place where he would fight for the life he wanted to return to.

That evening Nitin met his friends at their regular, for the last time before he leaves for Bombay next day.

The adda that night felt different.

Not quieter — the same crickets chirped, the same distant train whistled, the same mosquitoes debated who to bite first — but heavier, like the air itself knew something was ending.

The boys sat in their usual circle behind the old railway godown, a place so familiar it felt like it had fingerprints from every version of them — bored teenagers, dramatic poets, beer philosophers, future adults who weren't ready to be adults yet.

A few bottles of beer stood like monuments to poor life choices, and two joints burned slowly, like candles in a strange farewell ceremony.

Chotu opened the first beer with reverence, like he was opening a time capsule.

"So," he said, trying for casualness and failing completely, "our man's really going."

No one replied.

Mukesh cleared his throat. "I mean... who approved this? Who said this was allowed?"

Sunny nodded. "We should have taken signatures. Or at least filed emotional objections."

Nitin smiled, the kind of smile that comes with a knot inside. "It's just Bombay. I'm not going to Mars."

"Yes," Chotu said, eyes narrowing. "But people who go to Bombay return different. They eat fancy bread. They say things like 'let's catch up.' They forget their own pincode."

Mukesh stared at him. “We don't remember our pincode now also”

“That’s not the point,” Chotu snapped, already emotional.

They all laughed — not because it was funny, but because laughter was easier than crying.

Someone handed Nitin a joint. He took a slow drag. The smoke settled like another memory in the air.

For a minute, they didn’t speak. They just existed — together — the way they always had.

Sunny exhaled smoke toward the sky. “Do you remember the first time we tried beer?”

Groans. Laughter. Shame.

“Oh God,” Mukesh said, covering his face. “We thought one bottle would knock us out. We whispered while opening it like we were diffusing a bomb.”

“And Nitin took one sip and said, ‘I think I’m drunk,’” Chotu added.

Nitin protested.

“You were dramatic,” Chotu corrected.

They laughed again — the kind of laugh that has history behind it.

“And Mukesh,” Chotu continued, pointing with a bottle, “our official love courier.”

Mukesh rolled his eyes, but his smile betrayed him. "Do you know how humiliating it is to stand outside a tuition center pretending to 'just pass by' every day? I was basically a walking postal service — no salary, no respect."

"But high emotional stakes," Sunny said solemnly.

"It was worth it," Mukesh admitted, looking at Nitin. "You two were... something."

Nitin didn't say anything, but his jaw tightened — not with grief, but with gratitude.

"And then," Sunny said, "the first time we tried marijuana..."

Everyone immediately looked at Chotu.

"I thought the electric pole was talking to me!" Chotu confessed.

"You told the moon to calm down," Mukesh reminded him.

"I thought it was too bright!" Chotu defended.

They were laughing so hard they had to pause just to breathe.

"And Ramleela," Sunny said, suddenly softer. "Remember?"

A different kind of quiet settled.

Nitin as Lord Ram. Painted gold, wearing a too-heavy garland, adjusting his wig every five minutes. And his gang in the front row, clapping harder than anyone else — not because the performance needed applause, but because their friend was up there, and that was enough.

“We thought you'd always be larger than life,” Mukesh said. “Maybe we were right.”

Nitin looked away, blinking fast.

“And the December picnics,” Chotu added, voice warm now. “The riverbank. The cheap chips. The football that always got punctured. The sun that felt like vacation. And none of us had any idea life could change.”

It wasn’t nostalgia.

It was recognition.

They weren’t just drinking or smoking or sitting around.

They had grown up together.

Breath by breath.

Laugh by laugh.

Stupid decision by stupid decision.

These were not stories.

These were the foundations of their identities.

The time Chotu declared himself a philosopher after three puffs and tried to rename the moon.

These weren’t memories.

These were bones.

The structure of who they became.

“When you go,” Mukesh said, staring at the ground, “things will change.”

Nitin looked at him. "Maybe. But not this. This stays."

Chotu's voice cracked. "And when you become famous, don't forget we were the ones who saw your terrible school acting."

"I was good," Nitin protested.

"You said your lines like a nervous calculator," Shyam told.

"You tripped over your own fake beard," Chotu added.

"And we still cheered," Mukesh finished.

Nitin laughed — a real laugh — and then his eyes blurred.

He didn't want this night to end.

He didn't want this version of life to end.

But endings come dressed as new beginnings.

Mukesh suddenly stood and put a hand on Nitin's shoulder.

No dramatics.

Just sincerity.

"When life gets difficult there — and it will — remember this place. Remember we believed in you before anyone else did. Before Bombay, before producers, before cameras... it was us. Here."

Chotu raised a beer. "To dreams."

Sunny raised his. "To stupid courage."

Mukesh raised his. "To friendship that doesn't break."

Nitin raised his last. "To the adda — our first home."

They clinked bottles.

Foam spilled.

Eyes burned.

Not one of them wiped their tears — wiping would have admitted they were crying.

Nitin looked at them — really looked.

These were his brothers.

Not by blood, but by time, foolishness, loyalty, and shared growing up.

He didn't say goodbye.

Boys rarely do.

He just said, quietly, "I'll make this count."

And he meant it — not for fame, not for glory —

But for them.

For the adda.

For the boys who saw Dhruv Kumar before the world ever would.

Nitin pushed the door open slowly, trying his best to appear sober — the way every young man believes he can when he's very much not. The house was quiet. Too quiet. The kind of quiet where the walls seem to be listening. Only one lamp was

on in the living room, glowing warm and low, like a lone candle in a temple.

His father was sitting on the old wooden chair, elbows on his knees, hands loosely clasped. As if he hadn't moved in hours.

Nitin froze.

His father looked up.

"Nitin," he said softly. "Are you drunk?"

There was no anger in the question. No suspicion. Just curiosity. And maybe a hint of recognition — the kind older men carry when they've seen themselves in younger mirrors.

Nitin nodded. But it wasn't the confident, rebellious nod of a teenager saying so what?

It was small. Almost childlike. Like a kid caught stealing sweets.

His father didn't speak. Didn't stand. Didn't sigh. Instead, he reached under the chair and pulled out two beer bottles. He placed them on the floor. The clink of the glass sounded louder than it should have.

"I thought," he said, almost as if explaining something simple and practical, "I would have one with my son before he leaves."

The words landed slowly.

Nitin felt something swell behind his ribs — guilt, maybe. Or love. Or both. He dragged himself forward, legs clumsy but intentions clear, and sat beside his father on the floor.

"I can... handle one more," he said, trying to seem in control, dignity wobbling but alive.

His father gave a small, lopsided half-smile. "Let's hope you don't fall asleep halfway through."

He opened the beers — not ceremoniously, not dramatically — just like a man who has opened many bottles in his life but never one like this.

They sat shoulder to shoulder, facing the quiet room. They didn't toast. They didn't say "cheers." They simply drank, letting silence do the talking.

There are silences that suffocate.

And there are silences that hold.

This was the second.

After a while, his father exhaled deeply, like something inside him had finally given up resisting.

"I want you to know something," he began.

Nitin turned slightly, listening without interrupting.

"I was never against your dream."

His father didn't look at him. He looked at a point ahead, somewhere past the wall — like the memories he was speaking to were still standing there.

“You think parents say no because they don’t understand,” he continued. “But I understand dreams too well.”

He took another drink, slower this time.

“When I was your age, I had plans too. Brave ones. The kind where you believe the world will make space just because you’re willing to run toward it.”

Nitin had never heard him talk like this. Not once. His father was a practical man. Woke at six. Ironed his shirts. Paid electricity bills on time. A man carved from routine.

Tonight, he was someone else — someone who once believed.

“I tried,” his father said. “Life didn’t break me in one moment. It chipped me. Little by little. Missed chances. Situations I couldn’t control. Responsibilities that came before I understood I had chosen them.”

His voice didn’t crack. But there was something raw in it — the kind of raw that only comes from old, healed-over wounds.

“I just…” He swallowed. “I didn’t want that to happen to you.”

Nitin felt his throat tighten. He stared at his own beer bottle because looking at his father suddenly felt too heavy.

His father’s hand — the same hand that had held his fingers when he learned to walk, the same one that pushed his bicycle from behind — was trembling slightly.

Not from age.

From memory.

"I wasn't trying to stop you," he said again, but more quietly. "I was just... afraid. Afraid life would not fail you the way it failed me."

Tears didn't fall. They didn't need to. The ache in the room was enough to fill it.

Nitin placed his beer on the floor and breathed out slowly.

"You didn't fail," he said, his voice steady in a way his heart wasn't.

His father let out a soft, humorless breath — the kind that happens when someone doesn't believe what they are hearing.

"You didn't," Nitin repeated, now firmer. "You raised us. You gave us dignity. I have never seen you bow your head to anyone. Never. You think that's failure?"

His father blinked. Once. Slowly. As if his body needed time to process that sentence.

They didn't hug. They didn't touch. But something closed the distance between them anyway.

The silence between them changed — not heavy now, but warm. Shared. Understood.

After a while, Nitin leaned back on his palms and looked up.

"I'm scared too," he said. "Going to Bombay. I don't know what will happen. But I have to try."

His father nodded — not in approval or defeat, but in recognition.

"The world is bigger than Kanpur," he said softly. "Go see it. But don't let it make you forget who you are."

Nitin turned to him fully. "I won't."

His father finally looked at him — and in his eyes was everything he had never said:

I love you.

You are my pride.

I am terrified to let you go.

But I will.

He placed his hand gently on Nitin's head — a gesture usually reserved for blessings, prayers, and farewells.

They finished their beers in silence.

Tomorrow, Nitin would leave for Bombay — a city that didn't know his name yet.

Tonight, a father and son sat on the floor of their small living room, close in the quiet way men love when they don't know how to say it.

No dramatic speeches.

No tears running down cheeks.

Just truth, steady and alive.

The kind that stays. Forever.

Kanpur Junction looked like it had mistakenly been informed that a celebrity would be arriving, because the crowd around Nitin could not be justified by any other explanation. His parents flanked him like two bodyguards hired by budget constraints, while Nitin himself looked equal parts nervous and hungover.

His mother was on a mission: she fixed his collar, dusted his shoulders, checked his pockets, checked them again, then asked if he had "enough money".

His father stood next to him holding a thermos of chai with the solemnity of a priest carrying holy water.

And then came the cavalry.

Chotu and Mukesh thundered onto the platform as if auditioning for an action film.

Chotu immediately shouted, "BOMBAY IS SO READY FOR YOU, BHAI!"

Mukesh added, "If you get famous, we'll handle your fan club here!"

Nitin groaned. "You two are the reason my neighbors think I'm unstable."

Chotu clapped him on the back so hard Nitin almost dropped his luggage. "Bro, when you become a star, do NOT forget us."

"I won't," Nitin said.

Mukesh squinted at him dramatically. "Promise?"

Nitin nodded a yes with a smile.

The train honked, and chaos erupted. His mother shoved a steel tiffin into his hands.

"Eat this. And don't eat food from strangers."

His father added, "And don't talk to strangers."

Chotu objected loudly, "TALK TO ALL STRANGERS! NETWORKING IS IMPORTANT!"

His parents glared. Chotu smiled, unrepentant.

As the train slowed to a stop, Mukesh grabbed Nitin in a dramatic hug that lasted far too long. "Bro, when you come back rich, remember: I want a bike. A fancy one."

Chotu added, "And I want to be your manager. I'll take only a 40 percent commission."

"Forty?!" Nitin sputtered.

"All great managers take 40," Chotu lied confidently.

The train began to pull away. His mother waved. His father nodded in quiet pride. Chotu and Mukesh sprinted alongside the window shouting:

"GO RULE BOMBAY!"

"DON'T FORGET US!"

"AND SEND MONEY WHEN YOU BECOME RICH!"

Nitin leaned out of the window, laughing despite the lump in his throat.

His last image of Kanpur was his two best idiots waving wildly, his parents smiling through worry, and a chaiwala watching the scene like it was the climax of a soap opera.

Bombay didn't know him yet.

But he was coming anyway.

Victoria Terminus looked less like a railway station and more like a majestic cathedral that had been force-fed chaos for breakfast. Dhruv Kumar—formerly known as Nitin Tiwari until the train crossed the Uttar Pradesh border and destiny demanded rebranding—stepped out with a thudding heart and two overstuffed bags digging into his shoulders.

Bombay hit him immediately.

The noise.

The people.

The smell.

The feeling that the city was personally challenging him to a duel.

As he dragged his bags through the station, watching a thousand stories walking past him, Dhruv felt something stirring in his chest. A cocktail of fear, awe, and a suspicious amount of stale samosa fumes.

So this is it, he thought. The city that decides who becomes a legend... and who becomes a cautionary tale parents whisper to their children.

He pushed outside and waved down a taxi. A black-and-yellow Fiat screeched to a halt like it had been summoned by dark magic.

“Kahan?” the driver asked.

“ Koliwada... Chawl number 42.”

The driver gave a long, philosophical sigh. The kind taxi drivers reserve for men heading toward financially humble destinations.

The taxi lurched forward, and Dhruv stared out the window, absorbing the madness. Skyscrapers rose like showing giant middle fingers to gravity. Billboards advertised faces he had memorized over years of staring at film magazines. Traffic behaved like all vehicles were paid per collision.

One day, he told himself, my face will be on one of those billboards. Ideally without a helmet ad.

They finally entered Koliwada’s narrow lanes, which seemed designed for ants but repurposed for humans by a cruel god. Laundry hung everywhere like surrender flags. Children ran around with the confidence of tax auditors. He reached the address he was given.

And then he spotted him—Raju.

Wide grin. Bright eyes. Shirt that had definitely seen better decades.

“Arrey DHRUV! Welcome, welcome!” Raju yelled, waving his arms as if Dhruv had just won an Oscar.

Dhruv hurried over. "Good to see you! Everyone back home is so proud... you know, you being a cameraman and all—"

Raju's expression flickered so fast it deserved its own sound effect.

"Yes, yes, camera... related," he said, clearing his throat. "Very technical job. Very high-level."

He paused. "I manage shadows."

Dhruv blinked. "Shadows?"

"Yes," Raju nodded proudly. "I hold umbrellas. To make shadows. Very difficult art."

It hit Dhruv.

Raju wasn't a cameraman.

He was a spotboy.

A professional expert in tea delivery, umbrella holding, and occasionally preventing actors from fainting.

But the confidence with which he said "shadow manager" almost convinced Dhruv that NASA could use him.

They climbed into the chawl—Chawl No. 42—a structure that looked like it was built during British rule and then politely ignored ever since. The corridor was so narrow even sadness would have to walk sideways. Every door opened directly into someone else's business.

"This," Raju said proudly, pushing open his tiny room, "is where we stay."

Dhruv looked inside.

The room was so small it could be vacuumed by inhaling sharply. One fan. One cot. One window facing a wall that was only slightly less depressing than the window.

"It's... compact," Dhruv whispered.

Raju puffed his chest. "You're lucky you got this! Bombay hospitality! Many newcomers sleep at stations. Or footpaths. Or outside temples"

Dhruv placed his bags in the corner—because that was the only corner—and sat on the cot.

It creaked like it was filing a complaint.

He looked around the cramped room, smelled the mixture of frying chilies and ambition, and heard arguments from three different families through the walls.

And yet...

His heart beat faster.

Because this noisy, cramped, unforgiving chawl...

It was his beginning.

And somewhere deep inside, a voice whispered with reckless, dangerous hope:

One day... this city will say your name.

Dhruv Kumar had imagined struggle before he came to Bombay, but he had imagined it in a heroic, slow-motion, background-music kind of way. Something where he walked in

the rain, looking poetic, and talent scouts leaped out of nowhere screaming, "You! You're the next superstar!"

Now his trust with struggle started and.

Reality was... different.

Reality was a casting assistant shouting, "Next!" without looking up and Dhruv walking into the room only to find that twenty-seven other men who looked exactly like him were already lined up — same hopeful eyes, same cheap shirts, same slightly defeated shoulders. The only difference was that some of them had better hair.

Every day Dhruv woke up in Raju's shoebox-sized room — a space so small that if two grown men inhaled at the same time, the oxygen level dropped to dangerous levels. He would brush his teeth with a mug of water whose personality was "mildly suspicious," wash his face at a tap that coughed more than it flowed, and head out like a soldier walking into a war zone where the enemy was rejected.

The first audition he went for was for a toothpaste commercial. He didn't get it because the casting director said he smiled too "philosophically," whatever that meant. Dhruv suspected it was because they wanted someone whose teeth glowed like uranium rods.

The next audition was for a noodle advertisement. The director looked at him, squinted, and said, "You don't look like someone who eats noodles." Dhruv wanted to ask what that

even meant. Did noodles come with a personality test? Did he need to slurp aggressively to prove his eligibility?

Another day he auditioned for a role described as "Young man, 22–30, athletic, charming, heroic, broad shoulders preferred, jawline required." Dhruv had half a jawline and a stomach that was more hopeful than sculpted. He didn't even make it past the door. The assistant took one glance and said, "We'll keep your profile in our files," which Dhruv later learned was industry code for: "Forget you ever existed."

Money began evaporating faster than his confidence. The small bundle of notes he had brought from Kanpur now looked like something a magician would use for a disappearing act. Day after day, Dhruv returned to the chawl exhausted, sunburnt, and increasingly aware that Bombay was a city with ambition-eating teeth.

Raju, meanwhile, always seemed strangely cheerful. Dhruv suspected it was because Raju's job — being a spotboy — involved tasks that required absolutely zero shame. Raju would fetch tea, carry boxes, run errands, wipe sweat off actors' faces, and even hold umbrellas for people who yelled instructions without ever looking at him. But Raju was proud of it. He said it taught humility, which Dhruv thought was just a polite way of saying, "I have surrendered to chaos."

One late evening, Dhruv sat on the chawl balcony — a generous term for the ten-inch patch of floor outside the door — counting coins like a disappointed accountant. Raju sat

beside him, slurping an orange popsicle he had bought with alarming joy.

"You look like someone who just discovered he only has three days left to live," Raju said.

Dhruv sighed. "My money is vanishing."

"Money always vanishes," Raju replied. "That's why rich people invented banks. And poor people invented denial."

Dhruv didn't laugh. It was beginning to hit him hard — the rent, the food, the travel, the audition fees, the occasional desperation snacks... everything was draining him. Bombay wasn't just the city of dreams. It was also the city of bills.

Raju nudged him.

"Look, I can get you work."

Dhruv blinked. "Work? What kind of work?"

"Extra work," Raju said proudly. "Background actor. Crowd scenes. That kind."

Dhruv's soul made a sound similar to a dying harmonium. "I came here to be a lead actor."

"And you will be," Raju said with the confidence of a motivational speaker selling lies. "But until then, you need to eat, right?

Dhruv stared at him. "I'm not doing background work."

The next morning, Dhruv was doing background work.

His first job as an extra was in a marketplace scene. He was asked to walk from Point A to Point B carrying a basket of fake tomatoes. Simple. Except the tomatoes kept falling out, rolling everywhere like mischievous toddlers running away from chores. The director screamed, the assistant screamed, the spotboys screamed, and finally Dhruv screamed internally while pretending to smile.

The next job required him to stand behind the hero during an emotional monologue. Dhruv, being a natural empath, got so moved by the hero's speech about heartbreak that he began crying uncontrollably. Unfortunately, the scene required him to remain neutral. Every time he felt a tear forming, he tried blinking it away, resulting in footage where he looked like a possessed owl.

He was then hired for a bar scene. Dhruv was asked to sit at a table and pretend to drink water from a glass that looked like alcohol. He took a sip. The director yelled, "CUT! Extras never actually drink!" Dhruv had to spend the next take pretending to enjoy an empty glass like a man who finds hydration overrated.

Another time, he played a prisoner in a jail scene. The costume department gave him shackles that were supposed to look real but felt uncomfortably real. The hero was freeing prisoners dramatically, but he kept accidentally skipping Dhruv. The scene was shot twelve times. Each time the hero freed everyone except him. Dhruv felt like this was a metaphor for his life.

Sometimes the jobs were absurd. He once played "Guy running in panic during monsoon storm."

There was no monsoon.

There was no storm.

There was a man with a hose and a cheap wind machine that blew directly into Dhruv's ears. He spent the entire take screaming silently while tripping over puddles and reconsidering all his life choices.

Despite everything, Dhruv endured. Mostly because there was no other choice.

He still called his parents whenever he managed to save a few coins for the STD booth. He would stand in line behind migrant workers, housewives, and broke lovers who all clutched phones like they were lifelines. When his turn came, he'd speak cheerfully:

"I'm fine. Eating well. Getting work. Bombay is amazing."

He left out the part where his meals sometimes consisted of two biscuits and hope.

He called Chotu and Mukesh too. They showered him with optimism he didn't fully believe.

"You'll become a hero," they told him.

"I hope so," Dhruv replied.

But the line always fell silent for a moment — because sometimes hope is just two friends pretending they aren't scared for you.

Then he called Gita.

Those calls were different. Softer. More fragile. He tried to sound strong, but she always sensed the cracks.

"How are you holding up?" she would ask.

"Like glue," he'd joke. "Cheap glue. The kind that doesn't stick properly."

She always laughed, even when she didn't feel like it.

And he always smiled, even when he didn't feel like it.

Talking to her made him feel like the world wasn't quite as cruel. She believed in him in a way he couldn't explain — like she saw a version of him he wasn't sure he could live up to.

After hanging up, he'd sit quietly sometimes, staring out of the chawl window at Bombay — the city with glowing buildings, broken roads, and millions of stories.

He had become one of those stories now. Not the glamorous kind. Not yet.

But the kind that begins small, bruised, stubborn — the kind that doesn't give up because it can't.

And somewhere deep inside, where dreams stubbornly refuse to die, Dhruv knew:

This city would accept him someday.

Or it would destroy him trying.

But either way —

he wasn't going home.

Not yet.

Dhruv's life as an extra was not exactly easy and the universe seemed to have decided that if he was going to suffer, he might as well suffer in full technicolor.

The other day, he was a member of a royal crowd in a period drama — a scene that required him to look terrified at a guy being dramatically thrown off a fake cliff. Dhruv tripped over the cliff-edge prop, fell into a pile of hay, and somehow ended up looking like a very startled, semi-nude porcupine. The director screamed. The hero laughed. Dhruv was mortified. And somewhere, the assistant spotboy making tea in the corner laughed harder than anyone else.

Soon, Dhruv was hopping from one movie set to another. One day, he was running as a villager chased by a tiger in a jungle scene, while the tiger was actually just a very aggressive costume on a man named Ramesh who had an unfortunate allergy to synthetic fur. Another day, he was part of a wedding crowd, waving hands dramatically while trying not to get smacked by Madhuri Dixit twirling at top speed, her lehenga behaving like a possessed drone.

He saw stars. Real stars. Sunny Deol shouting at the wind in a heroic outdoor shot, Aamir Khan fretting over continuity errors with obsessive zeal, Salman Khan tossing his hair in

slow motion (twice, because the first take didn't reach peak hair-flying intensity), and Jeetendra... Well, Jeetendra moved like Jeetendra always moved — a combination of a slightly tipsy ballet dancer and a man perpetually caught in a mid-spin mid-1970s music video.

One day, Dhruv landed on the set of director Rajkumar Santoshi's film,fresh from giving superhit *Ghayal.* Santoshi's eyes were sharp, alert, calculating — as if he could dissect a soul just by looking at it for five seconds. Dhruv was just another extra in a scene crowded with the usual suspects: poor villagers, horses that didn't obey, and props that might collapse at any moment.

The lead actor, however, was someone else entirely. He was the debutante son of a famous yesteryear superstar, and every line of dialogue he uttered seemed to carry the weight of a century. Or maybe he was just overthinking it. Whatever the reason, he couldn't deliver the emotional punch the scene demanded. Take after take, he stumbled, mumbled, and at one point, even whispered the dialogue under his breath, as if speaking it out loud might summon some ancient curse.

Dhruv, standing a little to the side, couldn't help but giggle. Just a small, irrepressible giggle, the kind that escapes when absurdity and human struggle collide. He tried to swallow it, but the image of the actor panting like a melodramatic fish out of water was too much.

The actor noticed. His eyes bulged. He turned toward Dhruv and yelled, "Do you think this is easy? Acting is hard!"

Dhruv, never one to miss a chance for honesty, replied, “Ofcourse it's. That’s why there are fewer actors and more engineers in this country. Getting a chance to act is luck. And if someone is getting it, they should not waste it.”

Santoshi, who had been quietly observing from the sidelines, raised an eyebrow. He didn’t say anything immediately, but there was a spark in his eyes — the kind of spark that comes when a director sees someone with instinct, timing, and maybe a little bit of nerve.

Finally, Santoshi walked over to Dhruv and asked, almost casually, “Can you deliver this dialogue with the intensity required?”

Dhruv’s chest swelled a little. “Sir,” he said, trying not to sound too eager, “I have done better in Ramleela back in Kanpur.”

Santoshi raised an eyebrow, not entirely sure whether he was being laughed at or if the boy was serious. Dhruv didn’t wait for approval. He stepped forward, squared his shoulders, and delivered the line. One take. Perfect timing, perfect emotion, perfect projection. The previous actor did so many retakes that everyone on the set remembered the lines except the one who is supposed to mouth it.

There was silence for a fraction of a second. Then, a collective gasp. The lead actor stopped mid-breath, the camera operator blinked, and even the horses paused in what could only be described as confused respect.

Santoshi leaned closer to Dhruv, pulling him slightly aside. "Listen, kid," he said, voice low, conspiratorial. "Since this movie is produced by the father of the actor, I can't do anything for you right now. Politics, money, old stars... it's a mess. But for my next project — an epic period drama called *Rannbhoomi*, starring Sanjay Dutt — I might have something for you."

Dhruv's heart did a tiny backflip. "Really, sir?"

Santoshi handed him a business card, the kind with heavy, embossed lettering that felt almost like a talisman. "Meet me someday. Don't panic. Don't overthink. Just be ready."

The shooting continued, the lead actor finally managing a line after an absurdly long number of takes, and Dhruv returned to his position in the crowd, smiling quietly to himself. He had survived the day. He had, in some small but real way, been seen.

And somewhere, amidst the chaos of the set — the shouting, the tripping extras, the errant props, the dramatic horses, and the starlets practicing their expressions — Dhruv Kumar felt the first true tingle of hope.

For a background extra, a man in the shadows of cinema, getting noticed by Rajkumar Santoshi himself was like being handed a lantern in a cave — dim, but enough to see the way forward.

The cameras rolled again, lights flared, and Dhruv, standing slightly behind a wooden cart, pretending to be a terrified

villager, smiled. He didn't know what tomorrow would bring. He only knew that today, he had mattered.

And in Bombay, that was the first step toward everything. Even as the hero struggled with the lines again, Dhruv realized a subtle truth: sometimes, the camera doesn't notice you, but the director always does—if you're ready to be seen.

Blasts, Dawood, Dutt and Luck By Chance

Dhruv Kumar's life in Bombay was a spectacular performance in being utterly forgettable. His home was a one-room closet where the walls were made of gossip and dreams, and his mattress was thinner than a politician's promise which he shared with Raju. His entire empire fit into a single, tragically optimistic plastic bag, which housed two shirts, a towel that had seen things, and a dream that his neighbors diagnosed as a clear case of delusion.

His professional domain was the blurry background of Filmistan, where his artistic genius was both prolific and entirely ignorable. He wasn't just an actor; he was a gallery of human minutiae. His roles included "Man Vaguely Chewing Something in a Crowd," "Startled Pedestrian #2," and his personal favorite, "Corpse Who Forgot to Stop Breathing." He was, in his own mind, a maestro—it's just that the orchestra was a mob scene and his instrument was a single, poorly timed cough.

But this life of glamour left a certain craving, a deep-seated itch that no amount of theatrical dying could scratch. Back in

Kanpur, his evenings were perfumed with a certain herbal sacrament. He missed the rooftop sessions, passing meticulously crafted joints like philosophical batons, solving the universe and deconstructing the cosmic brilliance of 90s dance sequences. Bombay, in contrast, was a brutally sober affair. It was all sharp elbows and no soft landings. He was missing the holy herb and he needs to find it soon.

After weeks of awkwardly whispering to spot-boys and junior artists—"Hey, you don't know where a guy could find... some creative inspiration?"—he was granted an audience with the legendary Habib Lightman. Habib was a lighting technician believed to be part-magician, part-electrical code violation. He never removed his mirrored sunglasses, claiming they allowed him to "taste the colour of the light." Rumor was he'd once resurrected a dead spotlight by whispering sweet nothings to it.

Dhruv approached him with the trembling awe of a pilgrim. "Habib, sir... I'm in the market for... solace."

Habib's head didn't move, but his lenses seemed to stare into Dhruv's soul. "What flavour? Uppers? Downers? Sideways-ers? Temporary bliss or permanent bewilderment?"

"The leafy kind," Dhruv confided. "The one that makes you question the meaning of a pigeon's life."

A grin slithered across Habib's face. "Rehmat Tea House. Ask for Chacha. Don't be crude. Ask for his 'philosopher's tea

leaves.' And try to look less like a terrified chicken. You're already radiating 'undercover cop' vibes."

The Rehmat Tea House was an establishment that had steeped in Bombay's humidity for decades, smelling of tannins and whispered secrets. Chacha, the man behind the counter, was so motionless he might have been taxidermied. Dhruv mumbled the secret code and was met with a gaze that seemed to inventory his life's failures, sigh internally, and reluctantly decide he was harmless. After a small eternity, Chacha pushed a tiny, newspaper-clad parcel across the counter.

"From the hills of Nashik," Chacha declared, as if presenting a rare vintage. "The morning dew gives it a... contemplative kick."

That night, on the grimy, open-air landing he grandly called his 'veranda,' Dhruv conducted the holy ceremony. He rolled a joint with the focused artistry of a watchmaker. The first inhale was a reunion with an old friend. It wasn't merely a high; it was a wormhole. The gnawing fears about rent and his next role as "Man Scratching His Back Against a Wall" evaporated, replaced by the warm, hazy nostalgia of Kanpur and heated debates about which film star had the most profound on-screen sigh.

He took another, deeper pull, holding the smoke in until his lungs cheered. The world's sharp corners melted into gentle curves. He was just beginning to unravel the profound mystery of why his landlord's mustache looked so judgmental when a jagged sound ripped through the evening—a rising tide of

shouts, frantic footsteps, and the metallic clang of pots and pans, the city's primitive danger signal.

His beautiful, buoyant high suddenly felt thin and brittle. Slumping over the rusty railing, he saw a swarm of people coalescing around the betel shop's ancient television, its screen a nauseating swirl of acidic colours.

"What's going on?" Dhruv yelled down, his words still syrupy and slow.

The shopkeeper looked up, his face the colour of ash. "Blasts, boy," he croaked, his voice breaking. "Not just one… many… the whole city is under attack."

The words hit him like a physical punch to the gut, sobering him with a brutal, instantaneous clarity. He lurched down the staircase, joining the stunned, silent crowd staring at the television, where the city they knew was being unmade in real time.

And then the horror began to detail itself, a series of hammer blows to the soul.

The screen showed the Bombay Stock Exchange, not a hub of finance, but a gash of smoke and fire, office papers fluttering down like black snow on men in torn suits…

Then a scooter, transformed into a weapon, tearing a hole in the earth at a busy market, a bus lying on its side like a dead animal…

Then Zaveri Bazaar, the camera lurching through a hellscape of dust and debris, past glittering, blood-spattered gold and twisted metal…

The violence was relentless, a clockwork of terror. A cinema blasted open during a matinee. A five-star hotel shuddering under an impact. The airport parking lot, a place of arrivals and goodbyes, now a scene of panic. The final, symbolic strike against the soaring Air India Building, its windows blown out, raining a blizzard of glass and memos onto the streets below.

Dhruv stood paralyzed as the city that had been a tough, unloving parent is now screaming in agony in the street. The very Bombay that had ignored his existence, mocked his ambitions, and paid him to play dead was now united with him in a single, terrified breath. A single tear cut a clean line through the film of dirt on his cheek. Bombay, the city that never slept, was having a waking nightmare. And in the ringing silence that swallowed the news, Dhruv trembled right along with it.

Bombay, the famously sleepless insomniac of India, had suddenly become a ghost caught mid-breath. The city that usually surged with the energy of a thousand restless souls now moved like it had been dipped in cold wax. Trains that once roared like steel animals lay halted, their platforms eerie and empty. Buses—normally stuffed with limbs, bags, and ambition—stood parked in long, silent rows as if they were attending their own funeral. The streets, which typically hosted the daily circus of honking cars, runaway cyclists, yelling

vendors, and pedestrians marching like armies, were shockingly bare.

Shops pulled down shutters not with their usual clattering confidence, but with trembling hands. Even the sea seemed quieter, its waves unsure whether they were still allowed to make noise. The air smelled different—less of frying snacks and more of fear, newsprint, and burning anxiety. People spoke in whispers, as if the city might shatter if anyone raised their voice.

Bombay had always been loud, messy, unstoppable—a place that prided itself on never pausing even for disasters. But now? It hesitated. It stumbled. It held its breath.

And for the first time anyone could remember, Bombay—the city that never sleeps—looked like it desperately needed to wake up.

The city felt stunned, suspended between yesterday's violence and tomorrow's uncertainty. And in that uneasy pause, another storm gathered: the investigation.

Police vans zig-zagged through half-empty streets, sirens slicing through the quiet like angry punctuation marks. Officers with tired eyes and rolled-up sleeves stood at blast sites, trying to decipher meaning from rubble. The usual swagger of Bombay Police—loud whistles, louder threats—had been replaced with a grim, almost mechanical urgency. They were rattled, furious, embarrassed, determined—all at once.

By the time the sun dipped again, the whispers had already begun to swirl like monsoon winds.

This wasn't random.

This wasn't some petty gang rivalry.

This was coordinated.

And coordinated meant professional.

Investigation begin and soon, two names rose to the surface with the inevitability of oil floating on water.

Dawood Ibrahim.

A name spoken carefully, like it might hear you and file a complaint. Dawood had long been the invisible landlord of the city—extortion, smuggling, betting syndicates, real estate, dance bars, and enough influence to make half of Bollywood chew their nails. But now the police murmured something new, something darker:

"This feels like his scale... his money... his network."

And riding right beside that name like a firecracker tied to a tiger's tail:

Tiger Memon.

If Dawood was strategic ice, Tiger was volcanic fire. Fierce, emotional, explosive in every sense. A man whose anger could knock down walls faster than a bulldozer. Police files described him with phrases like "short fuse," "hot-headed," and "could intimidate a hurricane." Now, intelligence circles whispered

that Tiger had mobilized men, materials, logistics—everything needed for a coordinated assault.

Inside police headquarters, rooms were thick with cigarette smoke, sweat, and adrenaline. Inspectors poured over charred metal pieces, torn circuit fragments, and twisted remains of cars. Forensic teams traced wiring patterns. Crime Branch officers triangulated phone booth records. Intelligence officials connected dots nobody wanted connected.

Bombay's underworld had stopped fighting each other long enough to fight the city itself.

Undercover teams flooded the night—into slums, dockyards, abandoned warehouses, and shadowy hotels where men with too many rings and not enough conscience stayed. Informers were woken up, bribed, threatened, shaken, caffeinated, shaken again. Every scrap of gossip was suddenly of national importance.

Patterns emerged.

Every bomb had a specific purpose.

Every target had economic or symbolic value.

Every device had precision.

And every whisper pointed toward the same dark network.

The newspapers printed cautious lines.

The TV bulletins trembled with speculation.

The police tightened their jaws.

Bombay had been hit hard—physically, financially, psychologically.

But the city wasn't collapsing.

It was sharpening.

And now the question wasn't if they would catch the masterminds.

It was how far the trail went... and how many shadows it would expose.

Days trickled by like nervous beads of sweat down the city's spine. Bombay was still shaky, but the investigation was suddenly moving with the speed and aggression of a wounded animal.

Every day brought a new raid.

A new suspect.

A new theory.

But nothing—absolutely nothing—could have prepared Mumbai for the headline that came next.

It exploded across newsrooms.

It ricocheted through drawing rooms.

It left an entire city staring at the television in disbelief.

Because the name at the centre of the storm was the last name anyone expected.

And when it finally hit, it hit like a bomb.

Sanjay Dutt.

The superstar.

The heartthrob.

ARRESTED.

Not for a film.

Not for a scandal.

In the Bombay blasts case.

For a moment, Bombay collectively forgot how to breathe.

Sanjay Dutt- The six-foot-tall, broad-shouldered, puppy-eyed prince of troubled charm.

Sanjay Dutt,the superstar and the scion of Sunil Dutt,actor,producer,director and now a respected politician also.

The newspapers printed it with confused caution, as if their own fingers didn't believe what they were typing.

"Actor Sanjay Dutt arrested under TADA."

"Possession of illegal arms."

"AK-56 recovered."

AK-56.

Not a pistol.

Not an old rifle rusting since the Partition.

An assault weapon.

The shockwave was immediate.

Tea shops froze mid-gossip.

Studio canteens went silent.

Directors clutched their hearts.

Producers cancelled meetings to sit in a circle and gasp.

Aunties at kitty parties dropped samosas.

The city didn't just react—it reeled.

For years, everyone had known Sanjay Dutt was "complicated." His struggle with drugs, his rehab story, his stormy personal life... all that was public. He was the industry's favourite troubled child—the boy who rose from ashes, only to jump right back because fire kept following him.

But TADA?

Arms meant for militants?

From the same cache the police claimed had links to Tiger Memon's network?

It felt unreal. Like a plot twist rejected by a B-grade writer for being "too dramatic."

Then details leaked.

During raids, the police found that Sanjay had allegedly acquired an AK-56 rifle and ammunition through his underworld contacts—contacts that investigators believed were connected to Tiger Memon's men. The reason?

He reportedly claimed it was for “self-defense.”

Self-defense from what, nobody could quite figure out.

Bombay was dangerous, yes. But "dangerous” in a crowded local train, aggressive taxi driver, occasional pickpocket way—not in a “you need an assault rifle like you’re guarding the Prime Minister” way.

Bollywood went into full-blown panic mode.

Some actors swore he was innocent.

Some producers quietly thought of reshooting scenes of films where he was the hero, adjusting scripts as if trying to erase the problem.

And the underworld gossip mill went berserk.

For the common man, it felt like a betrayal mixed with fascination.

Here was a star—one of their own—entangled in the same web of violence that had ripped Bombay apart.

Cops dragged him into custody.

Reporters chased the police vehicles like marathon runners with microphones.

Cameras flashed like lightning.

Crowds gathered, stunned, craning their necks to see their fallen hero.

Sanjay Dutt looked dazed, confused, exhausted.

A man who had always seemed to be running—from something, toward something, around something—was finally cornered.

The city muttered a single question:

If a beloved film star could be linked this deeply to the underworld... How many more shadows were hiding behind the silver screen?

Bombay, already shaken by the blasts, now felt the ground tilt under its feet.

This wasn't just a crime.

This was trust cracking.

This was innocence dissolving.

This was a new, frightening chapter.

And everyone—from film extras to businessmen, from housewives to hardened cops—realised the same bitter truth:

The blast had not just torn the city's buildings.

It was tearing open its secrets.

For the first twenty-four hours, the industry stood together like one big emotional joint family—everyone suddenly became a philosopher, a freedom fighter, and an expert in criminal law.

Actors who hadn't called Sanjay in years stepped out of their bungalows, blinking at reporters, declaring:

"Sanjay is like a brother to me."

“I have known him since he was this small—okay maybe not this small, he was always huge, but still.”

“He can never do such a thing. Never.”

But even as they spoke, their eyes darted nervously—calculating, scanning, mentally updating their film calendars.

Because the country was shocked… Bollywood was panicking. Hard.

Every producer who had a film with Sanjay Dutt went pale.

Some fainted.

A few pretended to faint for dramatic effect.

One producer famously walked into Mehboob Studio screaming:

“Cancel the song shoot! Cancel the fight shoot! Cancel the tea also! We are saving every rupee until we know what is happening to that boy!”

Another producer, who had shouted “Sanju is like my son!” on television, was spotted two hours later flipping through a list of replacement actors like a man searching for fresh vegetables.

Agents ran around like headless chickens, trying to reassure everyone while quietly negotiating with three new actors “just in case.”

The directors were no better.

They released emotional statements about "supporting an artist in a difficult time"... while asking their assistants to rewrite the script so the hero could be replaced by "someone available and preferably not arrested."

Meanwhile, the media camped outside every studio gate, waiting to catch trembling, mascara-drenched reactions.

And Bollywood delivered.

One actress dabbed her eyes dramatically and declared, "I am heartbroken. Sanjay is a pure soul."

The same evening she asked her PR manager whether she should publicly announce that she was withdrawing from Sanjay's upcoming film "because dates are an issue."

Another actor said, "The industry will always stand by Sanju."

He then locked himself in his vanity van and told his secretary, "If anyone asks, I'm shooting in Kashmir for three months. I don't want any connection with this mess."

The hypocrisy was so thick you could spread it like butter on toast.

For the outside world, Bollywood was united—crying together, praying together, acting heartbroken together.

But inside the industry, calculators were working overtime.

Insurance agents were being harassed.

Shooting schedules were being rearranged like a Rubik's cube.

And every producer had only one real thought:

"Is my film safe?"

It was a strange duality—on stage, they held candles for Sanjay; off stage, they held emergency casting meetings.

Bollywood had always been dramatic.

But this time, it wasn't just a performance.

It was…

emotional support on the outside, survival instinct on the inside.

A perfect example of Hindi cinema's oldest truth:

In Bollywood, tears flow freely…

but only the ones backed by box-office numbers are genuine.

One of the many films now drifting helplessly in cinematic purgatory—like a giant elephant stuck halfway through a doorway—is *Rannbhoomi,* Rajkumar Santoshi's grand, historic, debt-inducing epic. The movie was so massive it required three generators, two astrologers, and one priest on retainer. A film whose set looked less like a battlefield and more like the world's most expensive wedding mandap with horses.

But overnight, it had turned into a memorial site.

Why?

Because Sanjay Dutt, the freshly signed hero, was now facing arrest.

The producers—three men who already had the blood pressure of pressure cookers—were staring at their collapsing investment like parents watching their child accidentally flush diamonds down a toilet.

The enormous set sat in the sun, unused and embarrassed. The horses were bored. The cannon replicas gathered dust. And the extras wandered around aimlessly like ghosts of a battle that never happened.

In the middle of this cinematic graveyard stood Rajkumar Santoshi, angry, stressed, and carrying the soul of a man who had been betrayed by fate, luck, and possibly gravity.

He needed a new hero.

And fast.

Sunny Deol: The Patriot of Volume

Sunny arrived first, radiating patriotism and testosterone.

Santoshi handed him the script. Sunny flipped pages. His forehead wrinkled like a troubled mountain range.

"No shouting scenes?" he asked.

"None," Santoshi said.

Sunny slowly placed the script on the table as if it were contaminated.

"I cannot change history quietly."

And he left.

Govinda: Disco Meets Freedom Struggle

Govinda arrived next, wearing colors visible from satellites.

He skimmed the script.

“How many songs?”

“Zero.”

Govinda paused.

“Okay... then how many dance breaks?”

“Also zero.”

Govinda closed the script.

“A film without dance is like a rainbow without colors. I am an artist, not a tree.”

And he too exited the disaster zone.

Santoshi Snaps

Two rejections later, Santoshi had the look of a man ready to fight a window for looking at him wrong.

“I don’t need stars!” he roared. “Stars are unreliable! Overhyped! Loud!”

His assistant nodded like a terrified bobblehead.

“I just need someone who can act. Or vaguely act. Or at least not actively sabotage acting.”

Enter Aatish Kapoor, Lobbyist of the Lost Cause

Aatish Kapoor arrived with the swagger of a man who believed he was the centre of Indian cinema despite all objective evidence to the contrary.

He marched into Santoshi's office, hair perfectly gelled, shirt unbuttoned slightly too low, and confidence inflated like a cheap balloon.

"Santoshi sir," he said dramatically, "I heard you need a hero."

Santoshi blinked.

"I said I need an actor, not a walking billboard for fading stardom."

Aatish ignored the insult with Olympic-level professionalism.

"I can bring intensity, sir. Heroism. Emotional depth."

Santoshi raised an eyebrow.

"Your last film had you punching a helicopter while screaming about your mother's halwa."

"That was art."

"That was physics violating human rights."

Still, Aatish persisted.

He brought a portfolio of photos—every single one of him looking into the distance as if waiting for someone to bring snacks.

Santoshi flipped through them.

“Aatish… why do you have seventeen photos of you crying under waterfalls?”

“Versatility.”

“And this one of you holding a goat?”

“Emotional bonding with nature.”

Santoshi sighed deeply.

“Aatish, I need someone audiences genuinely want to watch.”

Aatish leaned in.

“I can do action.”

Santoshi shook his head.

“Your last action scene gave the stuntman a concussion—and he was standing behind you.”

“I can do drama.”

“Your dramatic crying once made a child in the theatre ask if you needed a doctor.”

“I can do subtlety.”

“Aatish, you don’t have subtlety. If subtlety walked up to you in broad daylight, you would still miss it.”

Finally, Santoshi ended the meeting by pretending he had a phone call from NASA.

Aatish left, deflated but determined to spin it as “creative differences.”

Thus, the epic Rannbhoomi continued drowning, while Aatish's heroic attempt to rescue it was rejected with the precision of a well-aimed slap wrapped in politeness.

Dhruv Kumar first heard about Rannbhoomi's crisis while sitting on the steps outside a studio canteen, eating a plate of the cheapest idli in Bombay—the kind that had the texture of damp chalk. A group of junior artists nearby were gossiping with the enthusiasm usually reserved for UFO sightings.

"Rajkumar Santoshi's set shut down, yaar!"

"The movie needs a new hero immediately!"

"Even Sunny and Govinda said no!"

Dhruv froze mid-bite.

Rannbhoomi?

Rajkumar Santoshi?

New hero?

His brain lit up like someone had switched on emergency floodlights.

He remembered the business card Santoshi had once given him—the one he had treasured like a holy relic. He had kept it between pages of a cheap Hindi dictionary, believing one day destiny would tap him on the shoulder.

Apparently destiny didn't tap.

It detonated scandals.

He thought of Sanjay Dutt—poor guy, arrested, humiliated.

Tragic. Terrible. Devastating.

But also...

well...

Dhruv couldn't help thinking:

Is this the universe giving me a sign? A very dramatic, slightly unethical sign? But still a sign?

He looked upward at the sky, as if expecting some celestial confirmation.

A crow pooped next to him.

He took that as a yes.

Dhruv stood up with a sudden surge of purpose, clutching the dictionary like a man clutching a prophecy. If heroes were chosen by fate, then fate had just thrown him a bizarre, slightly illegal opportunity.

"Sorry, Dutt Saab," he whispered into the wind, "but the universe works in mysterious—and occasionally morally questionable—ways."

And with that, Dhruv marched off toward destiny, or at least toward a chance to meet Rajkumar Santoshi again before the universe changed its mind.

Dhruv Kumar walked into Rajkumar Santoshi's office, trying to look calm and casual, but inside, he was a storm of excitement. Santoshi, buried under a mountain of scripts,

looked up, squinted at him, and then paused. Recognition flickered across his face.

"Wait a second," Santoshi said, leaning back. "You're that extra. The one... yes, the one who delivered the dialogue perfectly when the lead actor couldn't. The one I thought had some sort of hidden talent or insane luck."

Dhruv grinned. "Yes, sir. You gave me this card last year, said to meet you someday." He handed over the slightly bent, now crumpled card. "I took that 'someday' seriously."

Santoshi chuckled, shaking his head. "I remember thinking, 'Kid either has courage or no sense of self-preservation.' Looks like both were true."

Dhruv cleared his throat. "I came because I heard the lead in Rannbhoomi might not work out. And... well, if there's a chance..."

Santoshi's eyes twinkled. "A chance, huh? Let's see if that luck translates to talent. Sit. Act."

He handed Dhruv a scene: a revolutionary meeting his mother for the last time before going to the gallows. Dhruv read it once, smiled faintly, and delivered the lines with precision, emotion, and just enough controlled drama to make it convincing. Santoshi watched, leaning on his desk, nodding slowly.

When Dhruv finished, Santoshi clapped softly, almost to himself. "Impressive. Very impressive." He leaned closer,

lowering his voice. "Look, the producers will be shocked. But I will manage.

Dhruv felt his heart leap. Not for fame, not for money, but for the simple fact that finally, someone saw him — truly saw him — as an actor, not just another face in a crowd.

Santoshi handed him a pen and said, "*Rannbhoomi.* You're in. Try not to ruin it for everyone else."

Dhruv laughed. "I'll try, sir. I'll try."

And just like that, a background extra with a crumpled card, big dreams, and a stubborn grin became something a little closer to a lead actor.

The news of Dhruv Kumar being signed hit the producers like a meteor shower. Phones started ringing in frantic unison, like some apocalyptic orchestra. One producer leaned back in his chair, hair sticking up in random angles, muttering, "Did Santoshi lose his mind? This is not how cinema works. Stars are supposed to have names... and dental insurance."

Another slammed his script folder on the table. "We invested millions! Sanjay Dutt was the lead! How does this... this newcomer... fit into anything?" He spun around and glared at his assistant, who wisely decided it was better to have a mild panic attack in silence.

A third producer, pale and jittery, whispered as if speaking too loud might summon disaster: "Are we sure this isn't some sort of cosmic joke? Like... the universe is trolling us?"

Meanwhile, Santoshi was calm. Practically smug. "Relax," he said, waving a hand like a guru dismissing fleas on his robe. "Seven big stars rejected Zanjeer. One newcomer went in. The rest is history. Trust the process. Trust the universe. Trust me. Or at least trust that I have a very, very good memory and a love for chaos."

The room fell silent. Then one producer muttered, "Seven stars… rejected Zanjeer… That's true… but that was Amitabh Bachchan!"

"Yes," Santoshi said, fixing him with a look like a man who knows your mother still uses your baby photos to guilt you. "I am not claiming Dhruv Kumar is Amitabh Bachchan. Yet. I am simply saying: opportunity exists where stars fail. Also, I have a very good feeling about him. And if you interrupt me again, I am out of the movie too. Possibly politely, but out nonetheless."

Producers exchanged nervous glances. One of them finally asked, trembling, "Sir… what if audiences reject him?"

Santoshi laughed, a sound part amusement, part warning. "Then I guess we'll all blame marketing. And coffee. Definitely coffee. But mark my words: films are not built on names alone. They're built on… timing, talent, and a little cosmic intervention. Dhruv has timing, talent, and apparently, a universe conspiring in his favor."

The room slowly dissolved into a mixture of nervous laughter, muttered prayers, and frantic calculations. Dhruv,

oblivious to the chaos he had caused, walked out of Santoshi's office, heart pounding, head buzzing with excitement. Somewhere deep inside, he knew the journey was just beginning.

And somewhere deep in the producers' heads, a tiny voice whispered: What have we done?

Dhruv Kumar stumbled into the cramped chaos of Raju's chawl, still buzzing from the day's events. The ceiling fan rattled like it was holding on for dear life, laundry hung everywhere like colorful flags of surrender, and the smell of boiled vegetables mixed with damp cement in a way that was oddly comforting.

"Raju! Raju!" Dhruv shouted, waving his arms like he was conducting an orchestra of chaos. "You won't believe this—I... I got the movie!"

Raju didn't look up, still engrossed in the silent struggle between the old television and its remote. "Which one? The one with the guy who yells at laddoos?"

"No! A real movie! Rajkumar Santoshi's *Rannbhoomi*!" Dhruv practically jumped in excitement. "The one that was supposed to have Sanjay Dutt as the lead—but then... you know... arrested. So now it's me. Me, Raju! I'm the hero now!"

Raju finally lifted his head, squinting through the dim light. "Wait... you mean the same *Rannbhoomi*? The epic period drama? THE Sanjay Dutt was supposed to star?"

"Yes! THE Sanjay Dutt! And now... me. One man's tragedy is another man's—well—stardom!" Dhruv's voice was half disbelief, half manic laughter. "The universe has a sense of humor, and apparently, it's on my side today."

Raju's eyes twitched in awe—or maybe horror at the volume—"So, you're saying Dutt goes to jail and you walk straight into the hero's shoes?"

"Exactly!" Dhruv said, slumping onto the creaky cot beside him. "I called home already. Parents, Chotu, Mukesh, even Gita—they're all losing it. Mom cried, Dad muttered something about 'finally leaving Kanpur,' Chotu screamed so loud the walls shook, and Gita... Gita laughed so hard I thought she'd break the receiver!"

Raju shook his head, grinning. "So Bollywood's grand wheel of karma just rolled right over Dutt and dropped a new guy in his place, huh?"

"Yep!" Dhruv laughed, the sound a mix of relief, disbelief, and the wild thrill of survival. "Sometimes tragedy smells like opportunity, Raju... and today it smells like *Rannbhoomi*."

Amid the cramped chawl, the rattling fan, and the faint aroma of boiled cauliflower, Dhruv realized something profound. In Bollywood, luck doesn't knock politely. It barges in, kicks over a chair or two, and sometimes hands you a lead role while someone else is in jail. And right now, that someone was him.

Dhruv sat on the edge of his narrow chawl cot, staring at the cracked wall in front of him like it was broadcasting breaking news. He still couldn't fully believe it. Him. A nobody from Kanpur. A former extra who once played "Random Man Drinking Tea in Background." Now signed for *Rannbhoomi*, directed by Rajkumar Santoshi — a man whose shouting on set was considered both legendary and medically concerning.

Dhruv pressed his palms to his face.

"This cannot be real," he whispered into his fingers. "Maybe I'm still asleep. Maybe Raju mixed something in last night's dal."

Just then, as if the universe had impeccable comedic timing, the neighborhood phone boy screamed from the corridor:

"DHURV!! PHONE! SOMEONE IMPORTANT!"

Dhruv jolted upright, banged his knee on the cot, swore at the cot, forgave the cot, and sprinted out like an Olympic hopeful.

He snatched the receiver. "Hello?"

"Dhruv?" came Santoshi's familiar volcanic rumble.

"Yes, sir!"

"Mahurat tonight. *Rannbhoomi*. Seven sharp. Biggest names in the industry will be there. Don't dress like a man fleeing from his landlord."

Click.

Dhruv stared at the dead receiver.

His first thought: Mahurat night...

His second: "I look like the counterfeit version of myself."

Dhruv burst into the chawl as if someone had set his hopes on fire. Raju, who already knew Dhruv had signed Rannbhoomi, didn't even bother looking shocked.

"What now?" he asked, still lying on the cot like a man allergic to effort.

"Tonight is the mahurat night!" Dhruv cried. "My first movie! And I have nothing to wear."

Raju finally sat up, studying Dhruv's shirt—an item that looked like it had survived multiple natural disasters. "Yes," he said solemnly, "you cannot attend a Bollywood mahurat dressed like a man who lost a fight with a ceiling fan."

"So what do I do?"

"There is only one option." Raju stood with guru-like authority. "Borrow a suit from the neighborhood laundry."

Dhruv blinked. "The laundry?"

"They will give you anything if you promise them fame," Raju said. "In this city nobody gives you money, but clothes? Absolutely."

And Dhruv, desperate and hopeful, agreed

With no clothes of his own fit for human visibility, Dhruv marched to the neighborhood laundry run by Hari. Hari was ironing a shirt with such aggression it looked personal.

"Hari, I need a suit," Dhruv said breathlessly.

Hari didn't stop ironing. "Did you murder someone? Because murderers always ask for suits."

"No. Mahurat night. Rajkumar Santoshi. *Rannbhoomi.* I have to look presentable."

Hari stopped mid-stroke. "***Rannbhoomi?*** The real one? The movie Sanjay Dutt was doing before his arrest?

"Yes!" and I am doing it..Yes. I am the hero of ***Rannbhoomi*** and tonight is the Mahurat Night. Hari, you know my condition and tonight only you can save me.

Hari exhaled with the theatrical exhaustion of a Shakespearean king. He walked to a dusty shelf labeled Unclaimed Clothes: Owner Probably Eloped and pulled out a navy-blue suit. Slightly shiny. Slightly loose. Slightly smelling like it had been folded since the British Raj.

"This is your destiny," Hari said, handing it over. "Or a disaster. Hard to tell."

"I'll make your name immortal," Dhruv declared.

"Just bring the suit back without sweat stains," Hari replied.

By evening, Dhruv was standing outside the mahurat venue draped in the borrowed suit. The sleeves swallowed half his forearms. The shoulders looked like he was wearing two

inflated pigeons. But from five feet away — maybe six — he looked almost respectable.

The venue glittered with lights bright enough to tan a corpse. Paparazzi swarmed. Celebrities arrived with expressions reserved for royalty and people who believe oxygen should cost extra.

Soniya Mehra, the heroine of *Rannbhoomi* shimmered like a goddess dipped in expensive moisturizer.

Producers floated around clutching drinks and anxieties.

Dhruv stepped onto the carpet.

Nobody turned. Nobody asked who he was. Nobody pointed a camera at him.

But none of that mattered.

Because Dhruv Kumar — formerly Nitin, chawl resident, extra artist, accidental dialogue deliverer — was officially here. He is the hero of the movie and in sometime everyone will know who he is.

Wearing a borrowed suit, a borrowed chance, and a destiny that, for once, felt like it was choosing him back.

Dhruv stood at the mahurat like someone who had walked into a TV screen and couldn't find the exit button. Everything he had only seen in glossy entertainment shows was now happening three feet from his face—except nobody looked as calm as they did on television. In real life, Bollywood's mahurat

night felt less like a ceremony and more like a wildlife documentary narrated by a very confused David Attenborough.

He watched Jackie Shroff glide in with sunglasses at night, looking like a man permanently auditioning for "Coolest Human Alive." Anil Kapoor's mustache shone under the lights like it had a separate budget. Producers floated around smiling the way people smile when they're silently calculating bankruptcy. Every third person claimed to be working on a "big project," and every fourth person claimed someone else had stolen their "big project."

Dhruv was speechless.

Is this really happening? Is this legal?

He stared at actresses who looked like they were made of soft-focus lighting. Actors strutted around practicing their smiles like athletes in warm-up drills. Assistants sprinted past carrying clipboards, phones, and what appeared to be their bosses' will to live.

He had seen Bollywood gossip on TV—affairs, rivalries, secret projects—but here it was unfolding live, like theatre with too many costumes and not enough logic. He watched two legendary actors greet each other with the emotional warmth of two snakes hissing politely. He overheard a director passionately describing his "vision," but Dhruv was fairly sure he was just explaining buffet placement.

And in the middle of this glittering madness stood Dhruv Kumar from Kanpur, wearing a borrowed suit and trying not to

look like a man who might accidentally ask someone for an autograph.

Yet, under the chaos, something stirred—a strange certainty.

Maybe I belong here, he thought.

Bollywood was absurd, overwhelming, magnificent—and somehow, it felt like the beginning of his real story.

Then Aatish Kapoor arrived in a swirl of glitter and sunglasses, the kind of sunglasses so dark they could have hidden a small nuclear reactor. Nobody was quite sure if he had actually been invited, but in Bollywood, rules were optional. "Family first," someone whispered, which translated roughly to: we'll tolerate him because he's somewhat famous.

He moved through the crowd like a meteor of charisma, nodding at veterans, exchanging quick jokes with directors, and pausing dramatically in front of photographers as if every camera flash were a personal tribute to his existence. The disco lights seemed to dim in shame next to his outfit, a combination of sequins and silk that made even chandeliers look mundane.

Finally, he reached Dhruv. He extended a hand, smiled, and said, "Congratulations, young man. *Rannbhoomi*, huh? Big deal."

Dhruv shook his hand, starstruck. "Thank you, sir. I've always been a huge fan of your work."

Aatish's grin twitched slightly, just a hint of rehearsed humility. "I couldn't do it, you know... prior commitments," he said, and winked. Dhruv, polite and eager, didn't press. (The truth: Aatish had never been offered the movie, but he'd lobbied in his own imagination.)

They exchanged a few more cordial words, smiles perfectly in place, nods timed to appear effortless. The kind of conversation designed to impress anyone watching but reveal nothing substantial at all.

Dhruv walked away, heart racing, mind spinning: he had just met Aatish Kapoor. A living legend, disco survivor, and master of sunglasses indoors. Cordial, dazzling, and slightly unreal—a perfect Bollywood first encounter.

Suddenly the doors of the hall swung open with the subtlety of a cannon, and in walked Gulshan Kumar, flanked by a small entourage who looked like a mix of bodyguards, personal assistants, and people whose sole purpose was to hold his coffee cup in case it got lonely.

The chatter paused for a moment; the music dimmed slightly, as if even the DJ respected the gravity of the moment.

Gulshan Kumar—founder, owner, and almost divine spokesperson of T-Series—was a man who had risen from selling bhajans on cassette tapes in dingy corners to ruling the romantic musical universe of Bollywood. His family had fled Jhang in West Punjab during the chaos of partition, carrying little more than hope, a suitcase, and possibly the original

recipe for halwa. Young Gulshan began working with his father early, and from the first rupee he earned to the first cassette he sold, he believed in one mantra: devotion pays—literally.

A devout worshipper of Shiva and Vaishno Devi, Gulshan's life was a curious cocktail of religion, music, and uncanny business sense. He recorded bhajans for every deity you could name—Krishna, Rama, Durga, Hanuman, and even minor gods who probably didn't ask for it. But the universe, in its infinite wisdom, rewarded his devotion.

His cassette business took off like a rocket fueled by pure faith and catchy choruses. Soon, he moved into producing films, mostly romantic musicals, where the boys would sing on mountaintops and girls would spin in endless ghagra twirls while the music duo Nadeem-Shravan provided the sonic bliss.

By now, his latest production, *Aashiqui*, had shattered all records, and Gulshan Kumar had the smug but benevolent aura of a man who knew exactly how many hearts—and bank accounts—he controlled. He walked into the party like a man who had personally blessed every light bulb in the room, shaking hands, smiling, and possibly silently judging everyone's taste in ties.

His presence was magnetic, funny, and slightly terrifying; he seemed like someone who could both sing a devotional bhajan and sign a five-film deal while doing it.

As he moved through the crowd, Dhruv couldn't help but notice the entourage trailing behind him, some carrying

folders, some holding snacks, and one guy, inexplicably, holding a tiny idol of Ganesha.

The message was clear: Gulshan Kumar was not just a man; he was a phenomenon. And tonight, the party would bend gently to his rhythm.

Rajkumar Santoshi strode up to the small, makeshift stage like a general reviewing his troops, except the troops were Bollywood reporters, photographers, and a few flustered extras pretending to be excited.

He tapped the microphone and gave a brief pause, because every announcement worth its salt in Bollywood begins with a dramatic pause.

"Friends," he began, voice booming. "I am deeply saddened that we could not continue this movie with Sanjay Dutt due to... ongoing circumstances. But I know Sanjay would never want anyone to bear losses on his account." A murmur of polite applause rippled through the crowd, half sympathy, half relief that the word "case" had been politely dodged.

Then he smiled, eyes twinkling with mischief and pragmatism. "But cinema moves on, and stories must be told." He gestured dramatically to the side. "Please welcome the new hero of *Rannbhoomi*, Dhruv Kumar!"

Dhruv stepped forward, feeling like he'd been catapulted from the chawl straight into a space shuttle. Cameras clicked. Flashbulbs popped. Somewhere in the back, someone muttered, "Who let the extra on the stage?"

“And our heroine,” Santoshi continued, “the radiant Soniya Mehra!” The applause swelled again as Soniya, dressed in a costume fit for a warrior princess, waved like a queen acknowledging a slightly confused but devoted kingdom. Soniya is the daughter of Rajan Mehra,a former superstar of the 60s.

Santoshi gestured grandly toward a small table stacked with diyas. “Let us light these lamps to officially announce our epic period drama *Rannbhoomi*!” The diyas flickered, the camera crew fumbled to adjust lights, and the room erupted in the sort of applause reserved for miracles, or at least for newcomers who hadn’t tripped on their own costume.

Aatish Kapoor stood at the edge, sunglasses slightly crooked, silently recalling the days when he was the center of attention. Now he was just a spectator, watching flashes, smiles, and a future star in the making. The irony wasn’t lost on him, but he raised an eyebrow and muttered, “Well, the universe does have a sense of humor.”

The stage lights reflected off Dhruv and Soniya like cinematic halos, and for a brief, sparkling moment, the epic of Rannbhoomi was officially alive. The room clapped, cheered, and a few journalists hurriedly queried who Dhruv Kumar was, proving that in Bollywood, the spotlight moves fast—and sometimes, unpredictably funny.

Dhruv wandered through the party, still marveling at the sheer chaos of Bollywood in action. Glasses clinked, laughter bounced off the walls, and trays of food disappeared faster

than a director yelling "Cut!" from set. Alcohol flowed freely—cocktails, whisky, brandy—but Dhruv noticed a curious pattern: people disappearing into the bathrooms for a few minutes, only to return buzzing with an energy that made disco balls look lethargic.

"What on earth is going on in there?" he muttered to himself. Little did he know, in Bollywood parties, alcohol is merely the prelude. The real stories, the whispered secrets, the absurd deals—they all happen behind those frosted bathroom doors. A minor miracle, a plot twist, a whispered scandal—anything can happen while someone pretends to wash their hands.

Dhruv didn't witness any of that, but he caught enough glances, smiles, and slightly tipsy winks to know that this was a world apart from his chawl back in Bombay.

He was halfway through a plate of hors d'oeuvres when a sudden hush fell over the crowd. Gulshan Kumar, in his trademark bright kurta and ever-present smile, had taken the stage. The room instinctively straightened, as if someone had announced a royal inspection. Gulshan tapped the microphone once, twice, and the party quieted.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he bellowed, voice rich and commanding, "Pay attention!" Heads turned. Cameras swiveled. Even a few tipsy extras froze mid-step.

"I am thrilled to announce my next movie—*Pyaar Hain Tumse*! A musical saga, music by the ever-dependable

Nadeem-Shravan. A story of love so powerful that even stones will weep!" He paused for dramatic effect, letting the weight of his announcement sink in.

"And yes," he added, eyes sparkling, "I will be signing two newcomers for this movie. Because love... and Bollywood... always needs fresh faces!"

Dhruv blinked, heart racing. Newcomers. Music. Love. The air smelled of ambition, masala, and something slightly intoxicatingly mysterious—Bollywood in its purest, funniest form.

The next morning, the dawn light of Bombay filtered through the thin curtains of Dhruv's chawl, bouncing off the cracked tiles and the peeling paint like a promise. Today was the day the cameras would roll for *Rannbhoomi*, his first big movie. Dhruv could hardly believe it: the script, the sets, the historical costumes, the heavy swords—everything he had only seen on television or in his wildest dreams was now real.

At the initial production meeting, the producers shuffled papers, adjusted ties, and tried to look official. One of them cleared his throat and said, "We can pay you one lakh rupees, Dhruv, as of now. The rest... well... let's see how the movie does."

Dhruv, grinning ear to ear, nodded as if he were receiving a lifetime award, "One lakh is fine, sir. I just want to act." In that moment, he felt the dream materialize. The dusty chawl, the long hours running errands, the extra jobs, the glances at stars

he could only see on screens—all of it coalesced into a single, shimmering reality: he was finally an actor.

Meanwhile, Aatish Kapoor, always hungry for a new project, tried to get into Gulshan Kumar's *Pyaar Hain Tumse.* But the T-Series titan had already made it clear: "I want fresh faces. New energy! Something untouched! Not another recycled superstar with attitude!" Aatish sighed. Bollywood, like the universe, had its rules—and sometimes, the stars themselves had to wait for their turn.

Gulshan Kumar, meanwhile, was making progress. He had signed Jiya Kumari, daughter of a famous yesteryear actress, as the heroine. But the male lead remained elusive. Every familiar face—the sons of famous stars, the hot young actors—either had conflicting schedules, or worse, demanded salaries that could feed a small country.

One day, Rajkumar Santoshi happened to mention Dhruv Kumar in passing. "He's quite good, actually. I had him as an extra once, and the kid delivered dialogues better than the son of a superstar."

Gulshan's ears perked up. The idea of a talented newcomer who hadn't yet developed a sense of entitlement was like discovering a diamond in a stack of old newspapers. He picked up the phone and called Dhruv, summoning him to T-Series headquarters.

Dhruv walked into the office, knees wobbling, heart in his throat, eyes darting at the gold plaques, stacks of cassettes,

and a life-size cutout of Gulshan Kumar mid-song. "Sir," he said, bowing slightly, "you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, yes," Gulshan said, beaming, his fingers steepled as if plotting a masterstroke. "I've heard good things. Very good things. And I am prepared to offer you the lead in *Pyaar Hain Tumse."*

Dhruv's jaw almost hit the floor. Lead? Male lead? Musical? Romance? All at once? His mind did somersaults. "Sir... are you sure? I mean... me?"

"Yes, yes," Gulshan replied. "And as a token, we'll start with... fifty-one rupees. For now."

Dhruv blinked. "Fifty-one... rupees?"

Gulshan waved a hand like it was inconsequential. "It's symbolic. The rest will follow once shooting begins. Consider it... karmic investment."

Dhruv could hardly contain himself. He shook Gulshan's hand, almost falling over in excitement, and then quickly corrected his posture. "Sir, I will not disappoint you. I will... sing... dance... act... maybe even juggle if needed."

Gulshan chuckled, "Good, good. The heart must be willing, and the body obedient. Now go, prepare yourself. Mahurat is coming soon, and we have to show the world that T-Series is not just about music, it's about making stars!"

Walking back through the streets of Bombay, clutching the symbolic fifty-one rupees, Dhruv felt weightless. He had two

movies now: *Rannbhoomi*, where he would battle swords, destiny and a few overweight British soldiers and *Pyaar Hain Tumse*, where he would navigate the melodrama, musical numbers, and perhaps emotional tears sufficient to drown a small river.

And all of this, he realized with a wry smile, was because one superstar had been temporarily absent from the scene. Sanjay Dutt's misfortune had become Dhruv's cosmic opportunity. Fate, luck, and the oddities of Bollywood had aligned perfectly—like a director yelling "Cut!" at the exact moment a disco ball fell.

He pictured himself signing scripts, rehearsing lines, standing on sets larger than his entire childhood neighborhood. His suit from the laundry would finally have a purpose beyond comic relief, and someday, when he told this story, people would laugh at the absurdity. *Fifty-one rupees, Rannbhoomi, Pyaar Hain Tumse...* it all made perfect, nonsensical sense.

Bollywood, Dhruv thought, was like a cosmic carnival—louder, shinier, and far stranger than any he had imagined. And for the first time in his life, he was right in the middle of it.

And so, as Dhruv stepped out of the T-Series office that evening with a crisp ₹50 note in his pocket with a one rupee coin and a contract in his hand, he felt the world shift. Not in a loud, dramatic, filmy way—no background violins, no slow-motion breeze—but in a quiet, steady thump of the heart that tells a man his life has turned a corner.

Just yesterday he was a chawl boy chasing a dream too big for his pockets. Today he was the hero of *Rannbhoomi*. Tomorrow he will be the face of *Pyaar Hain Tumse.* Destiny, it seemed, had finally decided to stop treating him like a joke.

But Dhruv knew one thing—luck may open the door, but it's your sweat that keeps it open.

Bollywood was a strange circus. Some climbed by talent, some by power, some by pure accident. Some shone till the city swallowed them whole. Some burnt out faster than cheap Diwali fireworks. And if there was one lesson he'd learned in these whirlwind days, it was this: Fame is not a ladder—it's quicksand. Climb carefully, or you sink.

As he walked toward the bus stop, moonlight glinting off the crumpled ₹51 in his hand, he whispered the words that had suddenly become his guiding truth:

"Dreams don't come true when you chase success—they come true when you chase purpose."

And the night, for the first time in a long time, felt like it was smiling back.

Chapter 3:

The Great Bangladesh Adventure

Success has a strange habit—it rarely arrives alone. It always brings jealousy, gossip, and one heart quietly breaking somewhere else.

While Dhruv Kumar walked out of T-Series office with ₹51 and a future brighter than a Sooraj Barjatya wedding set, somewhere across the city a very different night was unfolding. One man's destiny had just begun to rise... and another's had begun to loosen like old stage makeup.

Aatish Kapoor had known failure before. Every actor who has been around long enough becomes familiar with it—like an unwanted uncle who keeps attending weddings uninvited. But this time, failure didn't just knock; it waltzed into his life wearing tap shoes.

Three flops back-to-back.

Three posters torn off from theatre walls before the glue even dried.

A few years ago, Aatish would have been the one standing on stage at a mahurat, shaking hands, giving philosophical quotes, and pretending he didn't know which camera to face (even though he always did). But tonight he wasn't lighting diyas or launching epics. Tonight, Bollywood had moved on without so much as a polite text message.

And so here he was—at Blue Moon Bar, the kind of place where dreams either drown quietly or make loud karaoke comebacks at midnight. A dimly lit refuge of neon signs, cheap whiskey, and men pretending their life choices were reversible.

The music was bad. The lighting was worse. And yet, for Aatish, it was the only place where he didn't have to pretend that everything was fine.

Aatish sat at his usual corner table, swirling his drink like it contained answers.

That's when he heard it.

From the next table—three boys. College types. Hair gel. Confidence borrowed directly from caffeine and youth. One of them pointed—subtle as a marching band.

"Arre, isn't that Aatish Kapoor?"

The other squinted. "Haan... superstar of Bihar."

Pause.

"Former superstar of Bihar," the third corrected, and they all laughed at the laughter of people who have never failed at something large enough to matter.

Aatish said nothing. He sipped his whiskey like a monk sipping enlightenment. But his ears were wide open.

The boys went on.

"Why are actors worshipped so much?"

"They're just people doing jobs."

"They get paid to pretend. We respect that shit?"

"Real heroes are doctors, soldiers, teachers."

"And these Bollywood types? Spoiling culture. Affairs, drugs, showing violence. Society ki vaat laga di."

Aatish could feel each sentence pierce him—not because it was cruel, but because it echoed thoughts he had himself at 3 a.m. on lonely nights when success was quiet and failure was very loud.

He finished his drink, slowly stood up, and walked over to their table.

The boys straightened—half nervous, half thrilled. A scandal was brewing. Perhaps a slap. Or a viral moment. Or at least a moral lecture with a dramatic background score.

But Aatish just sat down with them. Calm. Like a guest who had always belonged.

"Bolo," he said softly, "continue."

They fell silent.

He looked at all three, then spoke—not loudly, not dramatically, but with the heavy simplicity of someone who has lived the thing he is describing.

"You're right.

We are not heroes.

We never claimed to be."

The boys exchanged glances. Not what they expected.

Aatish continued.

"We are entertainers. Clowns, if you want. Aur haan, real heroes? They fight wars, save lives, shape the world. But listen... the world they save? It is hard. It is exhausting. It breaks people. Every day, someone wakes up and goes to work because he has to, not because he wants to. Every day people swallow disappointments like medicine. Every day, they lose a little bit of themselves just to survive."

He paused. Took a slow breath.

"Life is boring, yaar.

Not bad. Just tiring.

Ordinary. Heavy."

The boys didn't laugh now. They sat very still.

"And then... they come to us. To a dark theatre. To a small TV in a living room. To a radio song. To a poster. To a dance step. They come to forget. To breathe. To remember that life can also be beautiful. Irrational. Silly. Romantic. Dramatic.

Larger than itself. We give them not reality—but relief from reality. A break. A pause. A story."

He smiled, remembering something private.

"When a man who earns 8,000 rupees a month whistles when the hero punches the villain—he isn't cheering for us. He's cheering for himself. For his anger. For his imagination. For the victory he will never get to taste in real life."

One of the boys swallowed. Hard.

The boys listened — really listened.

"And yes," Aatish went on, "we have scandals. Affairs. Drugs. Mistakes. But we didn't descend from clouds with good lighting. We are people. The same people you went to school with. The same people who get jealous, insecure, lonely, hopeful."

He gestured lightly.

"When an accountant in a government office cheats on his wife with the HR lady, no one whispers outside tea stalls. But when a film actor falls in love with his co-star—suddenly everyone becomes a moral philosopher. Why? Because gossip is easier than introspection. It's entertainment too—just the uglier kind."

The boys swallowed and said nothing.

"And yes, drugs," he added. "If someone named Raju from Dadar snorts cocaine tonight, not a soul cares. But if a film star does it—headlines, debates, moral panic, national shame. Are

drugs wrong? Yes. But they are wrong no matter who does them. It is the spotlight that makes the sin larger, not the sin itself."

He took a breath.

"We are not saints. We are also not devils. We are mirrors. Sometimes what you see in us is just what you were trying not to see in yourself."

Silence.

"The soldier on the border," he said, "is a hero. The nurse in a hospital is a hero. The teacher in a dusty classroom is a hero. We are not them. We do not compete. But the soldier, the nurse, the teacher—they also deserve joy. They deserve softness. They deserve a world where they can dream. And that world... is us."

"We aren't heroes," Aatish said again, softly. "We are... the keepers of hope in a world that doesn't give enough of it. We tell people that love is possible, even when they have stopped believing. We tell them that dreams matter, even when life is shouting otherwise."

His voice dipped, quiet and raw:

"We make life a little less unbearable."

Silence.

Not the uncomfortable kind.

The true kind.

Aatish stood up, placed money on the table—not for the boys, but for the silence.

As he walked away, one of them finally found his voice.

"Sir..."

Aatish turned.

The boy didn't apologize. He didn't need to. He just said:

"Thank you."

Aatish nodded.

Outside, Bombay traffic went on, indifferent.

But for one brief moment, someone who had forgotten why he existed remembered again.

And that was enough.

Aatish comes back to his apartment and continues his drinking spree like his life is dependent on it. He is partly sad because of his failing career and partly happy because tonight he enlightened three mortals about the importance of the film industry.

He sits in his room which was dim, but not because he couldn't afford better lighting. The overhead lights worked perfectly well; he simply believed that misery should look aesthetically curated. A single table lamp glowed like a dying candle in a cathedral of broken dreams. If sadness was going to visit him, it might as well look cinematic.

Aatish Kapoor sat on the sofa, shoulders slumped in the posture of a man auditioning for the role of Tragedy Personified. A half-empty glass of rum rested on the coffee table. He was not drinking to forget — he was drinking to remember his own significance.

The door opened and Babloo walked in. He paused, taking in the dramatic silhouette.

"You're doing the dim lighting thing again," Babloo said, deadpan.

"It helps me connect with the void," Aatish replied without irony.

Babloo sighed, the sigh of a man who had already accepted that this conversation would involve several metaphors, at least two references to destiny, and possibly tears.

Aatish leaned back, staring at the ceiling in a way that suggested he was waiting for God, Fate, or a film magazine journalist.

"It's over, Babloo," he said, voice calm and theatrical. "My career is not in decline. It has already fallen. It is now rolling further downhill, gathering dust and ridicule like an abandoned suitcase. Do you know what makes me feel worse? It's the feeling that the best phase of my life is over, whatever happened in my life till now were the best parts of my life and the future will always be downhill."

Babloo sat across from him. "You're being dramatic."

“That is the only thing I’ve ever been successful at,” Aatish said, raising his glass in solemn toast.

He took a slow sip.

“You know Dhruv Kumar?” he began.

Babloo nodded.

“That boy has cheekbones so sharp they could open letters. And apparently, they also open doors. Two films, Babloo. They were talking to me. They said things like ‘You’re our first choice.’ Then suddenly, Dhruv appears, smiling like destiny’s golden retriever, and poof. My films walk away holding his hand.”

“The producers said they would have cast someone else anyway,” Babloo thinks in his head.

“I refuse to accept historical revisionism,” Aatish continues with the dignity of a fallen emperor.

He poured another drink — slow, ceremonial, the way religious offerings are poured into sacred vessels.

“And then I humiliated myself, Babloo. I agreed to audition for a second lead role. In Yash Chopra’s film. A supporting role. Me.”

Babloo blinked. He still wasn’t over the fact that Aatish had willingly said yes to something that didn’t involve slow-motion hero entries.

“But I did it. Because sometimes greatness must bend before circumstance. I entered the audition room with grace, poise, and more emotional preparation than necessary.”

“And then,” he continued, each syllable loaded with bitterness, “they gave the part to some newcomer named Shah Rukh Khan.”

He spoke the name like a bad medical diagnosis.

“He spreads his arms,” Aatish said, demonstrating with a limp flourish, “and suddenly the nation melts. I spread my arms, and people ask me if I’m doing a stretching exercise. Life is unfair, Babloo. Even gravity falls differently on different people.”

Babloo tried not to laugh.

“And now they say I should do character roles. Character roles. As if I exist to provide dignity to a protagonist’s emotional arc. I am not a footnote. I am not a plot device. I am the headline. I cannot be relegated to Uncle Territory. I would rather retire and open a mineral water factory.”

Silence settled, thick but comfortable. The kind that exists between two people who have seen each other survive worse storms.

“So what are you going to do?” Babloo finally asked.

Aatish stared into his glass.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe this is the interval of my life. The curtains down. The audience assuming it's already over. But maybe—maybe the second half hasn't started yet."

Babloo nodded.

Because every star has a point when it dims.

And every star, given the right script, can blaze again.

For now, Aatish simply sat there, illuminated by one lonely lamp, drinking his sorrow like it was the most beautiful performance he had ever given.

And honestly — it was.

Mornings in Bombay are always dramatic. Even the sun behaved like it had attended one too many award functions — shining with a bit too much ego. Aatish Kapoor woke up with the kind of hangover that made him question not just his choices, but also the physics of how one head could contain this much pain. His brain felt like a live orchestra performance conducted entirely by drunk monkeys.

No shoots. No meetings. No producers begging for his dates. Just his ceiling fan spinning slowly, like an existential metaphor for a career that had once spun faster.

He had recently rejected a few Doordarshan serial roles — emotional family sagas with 85 closeups per scene and dramatic background violins that could give migraines to angels. Television was not his destiny. Actors went from TV to

Cinema like evolution. Going back felt like a dinosaur applying for a job at Domino's.

He was still contemplating the meaning of life (or at least the meaning of last night's alcohol) when Babloo entered — smiling. Babloo never smiled unless something dangerous was about to happen.

"Why are you smiling?" Aatish asked with suspicion.

"Sir..." Babloo said reverently, "Saqib Ali is in town."

Pause.

"Saqib who?" Aatish croaked.

Babloo took a deep dramatic breath. "Saqib Ali. The Steven Spielberg of Bangladesh."

Aatish stared like Babloo had just announced that a unicorn was parking outside the building.

"Saqib Ali," Babloo continued, now pacing with Shakespearean flair, "made the legendary *Dil Dhaka Dhaka Kore*. A musical so big that half of Bangladesh danced for two straight months. It was their *Sholay*, sir. Their *Mughal-e-Azam*. It was the cinema. It was the movement. It was national therapy. Chickens stopped crossing roads just to listen to the soundtrack."

Aatish blinked slowly, *Dil Dhaka Dhaka Kore* sounds more like a doctor's next operation than a movie title.

"Who cares?," Babloo continued, eyes shining, "Saqib Ali now wants to go international. And the closest he can go

internationally is taking a flight to Bombay. He is making a magnum opus titled — *Love in Aakashganga.*"

Aatish regretted asking, "What is it about?"

"It's *The Sound of Music* meets *Star Wars.* A space musical. Aliens singing songs. A hero who saves the galaxy with a laser-emitting guitar. Asteroids dancing. Interplanetary romance. Emotional climax on Jupiter's third moon."

Aatish stared into the void. The void stared back.

"And he wants you to be the lead," Babloo added.

"Me? How? Why? On what medical grounds?" Aatish sputtered.

Babloo sighed. "He tried to cast Aamir Khan first."

"Ohhh. Here we go," Aatish murmured.

"Yes sir," Babloo nodded. "But Aamir spent nine hours questioning the script. He asked:

'If aliens don't have vocal cords, how do they sing?'

'If a guitar shoots lasers, what is the power source? Solar? Emotional trauma?'

'If the heroine is from Saturn, is her metabolism compatible with Earth's water?'

'Should I spend three months living inside a spaceship to feel the character?'

Saqib Ali almost fainted. He said, 'I am making a movie, not launching ISRO mission.'"

Aatish burst out laughing, clutching his forehead in pain. "Aamir is a national treasure. And a health hazard."

"So now," Babloo continued, "Saqib wants someone who is talented, charismatic, charming, screen-friendly and — importantly — does not ask scientific questions."

Of course. The universe had chosen him.

"And sir," Babloo added, lowering his voice, "Saqib Ali pays very well. Not in dollars, but in extremely respectable Indian currency. Also — and this is key — whatever happens in Dhaka remains in Dhaka."

"Meaning... if the film turns out to be a circus?"

"No one in Bombay ever needs to know," Babloo winked. "It will be your secret foreign mission. Like a R&AW operation. But with dancing aliens."

Aatish sighed. Destiny was calling. Or possibly a slow-moving disaster with choreography.

"Fine," he said. "We'll meet him."

Babloo grinned triumphantly. "Tomorrow morning. Hotel Sea Princess. Be ready."

As Babloo left, Aatish stared at the ceiling again.

Tomorrow, he would meet Saqib Ali — the man who wanted to give the galaxy a soundtrack.

He had no idea whether this would resurrect his career...

...or launch him into Bangladesh's secret cult cinema universe.

Both possibilities were equally terrifying.

"I have arranged a meeting for tomorrow evening," Babloo said proudly.

Aatish sighed. "Fine. But if this man asks me to wear silver tights and dance with aliens..."

"Sir," Babloo said softly, "Saqib Ali is a genius. And geniuses are always... a little weird."

Aatish stared at the ceiling.

Weird was an understatement. This smelled like destiny or disaster. Possibly both.

The next day would decide whether Aatish Kapoor rose again...

...or became a secret cult legend in Bangladesh.

Aatish dressed for the meeting as though he were attending his own biography's premiere in the Vatican—not a casual sit-down in a dimly lit hotel lobby. Every sartorial decision was a declaration of war against understatement. He wore a crisp, white silk shirt with the top three buttons defiantly open, revealing just enough chest hair to suggest ruggedness while simultaneously demonstrating that he owned an excellent grooming kit. His jacket was velvet—not just any velvet, but a midnight blue that looked like it had been tailored by a

frustrated architect who specialized in building dramatic shoulders.

And of course, the sunglasses. Indoors. At 7:30 PM.

The eternal question of why celebrities wear dark lenses inside has long baffled scholars. Is it to hide the redness of eyes that have spent the night contemplating the meaninglessness of fame? Is it to conceal the slight puffiness that comes from weeping gently over a particularly moving bank statement? Some say the eyes are the windows to the soul, and actors, being inherently suspicious of the soul, prefer to keep the curtains drawn. Most believe it's simply the most effective way to communicate one thing: *I am more important than the ceiling lights.*

So Aatish walked into the opulent lobby—slow, measured, slightly confused about the general direction of travel—like a man doing an expensive, avant-garde walk for a fashion show that had been abruptly canceled. Behind him trailed Babloo, his assistant, adjusting a cheap, slightly frayed shirt. Babloo looked like someone who had applied for a job as an accountant and accidentally ended up witnessing an alien abduction.

Saqib Ali was not subtle. He sat on a plush, cranberry-colored sofa wearing a jacket so shiny it looked like it was spun from high-grade Diwali fireworks and his hair was styled in bold, black waves that suggested he was constantly under the direct influence of a very dramatic hairdryer. He shot up the moment he saw Aatish, his enthusiasm registering at an unstable seismic level.

“MY HERO! MY GALAXY’S HEARTBEAT! My Solar-Powered Leading Man!” he roared, spreading his arms wide enough to embrace the entire continental shelf.

Aatish, flattered despite himself, offered a handshake that conveyed the unified grace of someone attempting to appear too busy to be this excited. They sat. The ritualistic ordering began: Tea, then an urgent cancellation of the tea for a double espresso, then a panic-stricken return to tea, and finally, three different kinds of biscuits. The waiter, a tired veteran of the hospitality industry, looked as though he were actively seeking the quickest route to early retirement.

“So,” Aatish began, leaning back, the sunglasses gleaming. “Your film, Mr. Ali.”

Saqib’s chest swelled. “*LOVE IN AAKASHGANGA*!” he announced, the title exploding out of him like a champagne cork hitting the ceiling. “It is a musical… in zero-gravity!”

Babloo, upon hearing the phrase "zero-gravity," momentarily paused breathing, perhaps wondering if the job requirements now included stunt work in low Earth orbit.

“Yes!” Saqib leaned forward, eyes sparkling with beautiful madness. “It will be *The Sound of Music*—but among the asteroids! Spaceships! Bollywood choreography on the rings of Saturn! **LASER GUNS THAT ALSO PLAY FLUTES!**” He paused, letting the absurdity sink in. “And laser-guided sitar battles. We need drama, Aatish, but with rhythm!”

"And I," Aatish said, a slight tremor in his voice, "would be...?"

"You," Saqib stated, striking his chest with dramatic reverence, "will be **Prince Rustom**, warrior-poet of the Seventh Galaxy. Your character is so emotionally complex, you fight entire armies while singing about the sorrow of unrequited love for a nebula. You are the anti-gravity Amitabh Bachchan! You are the emotional core, Aatish! The whole film orbits your tragedy!"

Saqib Ali launched into the pitch for ***Love in Aakashnganga***. It was a kaleidoscopic twenty-minute monologue that involved more manic hand gestures than a traffic cop in rush hour.

"...So, the hero, Captain Rustom, is lost in the Andromeda galaxy. His spaceship, the *Rikshaw-One*, is broken. He is lonely. He has only his **laser-emitting Gibson guitar** and the memory of his Earth mother!" Saqib paced wildly, the gold aviators catching the light and blinding Aatish occasionally. "The villain, General Zubisko, he is an octopus alien, eight arms, yes, **eight microphones**, singing mournful *ghazals* of interstellar loneliness! Captain Rustom cannot defeat him with phasers! He must defeat him with a *Sangeet-astra*! A power ballad so profound it gives the cephalopod existential dread!"

"Wait," Aatish cut in, fighting a truly cosmic migraine. "Is the General literally an octopus who sings?"

"Yes! This is depth! This is art!" Saqib leaned in conspiratorially. "But here is the *masala*, Aatish! In the second

half, Rustom crash-lands on a planet that looks like Switzerland, but is populated by benevolent, singing, **green-skinned space-nuns**! They teach him the **power of the seven Ragas of the universe**! Like *The Sound of Music*, but instead of *Do-Re-Mi*, it is *Sa-Re-Ga* on a nebula backdrop!"

Aatish stared at Babloo, whose eyes were wide with a mix of terror and professional excitement. Babloo gave a subtle, frantic thumbs-up sign—*just say yes before he offered it to a struggling theatre actor.*

"And the guitar?" Aatish asked, his voice barely a squeak.

"The guitar is the secret weapon! When Prince Rustom plays the **'Oasis in the Orbit'** song, lasers emit from the fretboard, creating a rainbow shield of hope that melts the octopus General's heart. And possibly his spacesuit's PVC lining." Saqib clapped his hands. "One hundred percent track record, Aatish! Let's make history in Dhaka!"

Aatish looked down at his hands. He was Aatish Kapoor, the former star who had politely declined the steady paycheck of Doordarshan. Now, his career—or at least his monthly electricity bill—depended on whether he could plausibly defeat a musically gifted, melancholic octopus alien using a laser-equipped power ballad taught to him by extraterrestrial, green-skinned nuns.

"So," Aatish said, slowly, rubbing his temples one last time. "When do we start the zero-gravity choreography rehearsals, and do the nuns require matching leather trousers?"

Saqib Ali smiled, a triumphant, blinding flash of pure, eccentric genius. Aatish was wondering what fresh hell awaited the next day.

For Aatish, this was either the role of a lifetime or a sign that the industry had finally resorted to casting people who openly wore sunglasses indoors.

Then, the mood shifted. Saqib's flamboyance dissolved, replaced by something steady, quiet, and infinitely heavy.

"You are wondering why a grown man risks bankruptcy making a space musical," and I also know that you are thinking that I must be an idiot", Saqib said, his voice dropping to a serious, grave undertone.

Aatish didn't deny it. Instead, in a move that shocked Babloo into an upright position, he reached up and slowly took off the sunglasses. He didn't do it for effect; he did it because, suddenly, there was something real in the room, and reflections were a distraction.

Saqib Ali's eyes held a memory. "I come from a country that is new," he began. "**Bangladesh**—born in the chaos, in the fire, in the unforgivable screams of 1971. I was there. Not as a fighter, but as a boy hiding in the dark. I saw my neighbors dragged out and slaughtered. I saw our women violated, not by enemies, but by men acting like demons. I saw the starvation, the desperate, raw fear."

The heavy words settled between them like grit. "I did not grow up with a silver spoon. I had no connections, no patron. I

made films because the reality I knew was so devastating, so ugly, that I had to construct a better one to survive."

He leaned closer. "People say cinema should show reality. But tell me, Aatish, what is the point of forcing a poor man to pay money—money he earned breaking his back—to see more of his own poverty? He knows his house is leaking. He knows his children are hungry. Why must he pay to see a depressed farmer die of shame?"

Saqib's voice sharpened, becoming a focused blade. "In Europe, in America—the fortunate countries—they can afford sadness. It is a luxury. Their existential angst is a hobby, like collecting antique spoons. They pay $20 to watch a miserable man analyze his miserable marriage. They have warm houses. They have safety. They seek 'meaning' in tragedy."

He slammed his hand lightly on the plush armrest. "But in my country? **Pain is free.** Pain is abundant. It's the free sample we hand out every day! Our men cannot fight the corrupt contractor. Our women cannot publicly shame the landlord. They are humiliated in life, but they cannot avenge it."

Saqib's smile returned, but it carried the weight and sharpness of steel. "But inside the cinema hall, Aatish? For those three sacred hours, that poor farmer sees a man who looks like him transformed. Not crushed, not humiliated—transformed. He becomes the saviour of thousands, the one who walks in slow motion while the world trembles. He romances the most beautiful woman, not because fate is kind, but because the screen finally is."

His hands shaped the air, sculpting the fantasy. "He stands taller than the villain—literally, sometimes. He wears a jacket he could never afford. He kicks down the door and doesn't just defeat the villain; he makes the villain dance to his tune. And when he wins, he doesn't whisper it—he sings it. Victory becomes melody. Hope becomes something you can hum on your way home."

Saqib sat back, his voice dropping into a steadier, almost prayer-like rhythm. "I do not make films to document the truth. Life already documents truth far too brutally. I make films to give relief—a small island of dignity and fantasy in a sea of daily compromise."

He pointed gently toward an invisible crowd. "If I can give a rickshaw puller or a factory worker three hours where rent disappears, where hunger is silent, and where he truly believes—even if only in the dark—that he is a conqueror... tell me, Aatish, is that not a greater service to society than any award-winning documentary that only repeats his suffering back to him?"

Aatish, who had come expecting to negotiate salary and screen time, found himself strangely speechless. He realized the man across from him was not delusional; he was a humanitarian armed with a camera and a dream of laser-guided flutes.

"I'll do the film," Aatish said quietly, his voice lacking any trace of theatricality.

They shook hands. Aatish needed the work, the money, and the dignity of a lead role, no matter how ridiculous the premise. Saqib Ali had found his international star, finally crossing the border into the realm of *Love in Aakashganga.*

For both of them, it meant hope. And sometimes, Saqib Ali understood, hope is the only thing worth singing about, even in space.Shooting starts ten days from now,in Dhaka.

Next Tuesday, before going to the airport, Aatish visits Anishka. He reaches her apartment and rings the calling bell. Anishka opens the door and Aatish gets in. She smiles and looks up. "Aatish? You look... different. Did someone cast you as a functioning adult?"

He smiled, a real one this time. "I signed a film."

Her expression softened instantly, the sarcasm melting away. "A real one? Not another brand commercial where you pretend to love aloe vera?"

"Science fiction." He swallowed. "Saqib Ali,known as the Spielberg of Bangladesh is making **Love in Aakashganga**. I'm the lead."

For a moment she simply stared, as if her brain were doing complicated math. "Bangladesh? Space? You?"

"Apparently even galaxies need romance," he said, shrugging.

A slow, warm smile spread across her face. "I knew you'd bounce back. Even when you didn't."

He looked at her, wishing he could tell her what her belief meant, how often her messages had kept him from sinking entirely—but romance with Anishka was a delicate thing: always almost, never spoken, suspended like a chandelier no one dared to touch.

"I needed this, Anishka," he said quietly. "Even if it's crazy. I just need to feel like I'm someone again."

She stepped closer, her voice softer than the velvet carpet. "You've always been someone. You just forget sometimes."

He let the warmth of her words settle in him.

Good luck, Aatish," she murmured. "Go make your space adventure. And when you come back, maybe... I'll finally see an Aatish who is genuinely happy—the one I first met."

He held her gaze for a long moment—part farewell, part unspoken vow—before turning away, carrying with him the soft, lingering trace of hope she left behind.

The plane touched down in Dhaka with all the drama of a tired auto-rickshaw coming to a halt—wheezing, shaking, and unsure if it would ever move again. Aatish adjusted his sunglasses (yes, still wearing them indoors—because star) and glanced out of the window. The city below greeted him like a fever dream of cables, signboards, and endless honking—Bombay's long-lost cousin who drank more tea and yelled louder.

Babloo, meanwhile, was already sweating like a guilty politician. "Bhai, humidity here has emotions. It's hugging me aggressively," he whispered.

Dhaka airport was a buzzing carnival. Porters, taxi drivers, people yelling in Bangla that sounded like poetry performed at gunpoint. Somewhere in the distance, someone was definitely frying something in mustard oil—mustard oil so sharp it felt like being punched in the nostrils.

"Feels like home," Aatish declared dramatically.

"It feels like home's louder brother," Babloo corrected, fanning himself with a boarding pass.

Their taxi ride from the airport to the hotel was an event. The driver maneuvered through traffic with the confidence of a man who had made peace with death long ago. The road was a puzzle made of rickshaws, buses decorated like wedding pandals, and motorcycles that defied physics.

"Are we... are we supposed to fit into this gap?" Aatish asked as their taxi slid between two buses like a letter going into a mailbox.

The driver simply nodded, humming a romantic Bangla song. Zen master. High-speed philosopher.

At last, they reached the hotel—grand in a way where the lobby looked expensive but the walls near the elevator told tragic stories. The kind of hotel where the chandelier wants to be five-star but the air conditioner says budget guest house.

Saqib Ali was already there in the lobby, wearing sunglasses indoors too, proving that eccentric geniuses and fading stars share fashion sense.

“My prince!” he exclaimed, arms open wide, as though greeting a long-lost brother from a previous life (possibly in a parallel universe where they were both flamingos).

Aatish gave a dignified nod, because stars do not run forward to hug, they receive affection.

“So, shooting starts tomorrow!” Saqib announced, clapping his hands.

“Perfect,” Aatish said, settling into the nearest cushioned chair like a king returning to his throne. “So, about the script”

Saqib paused.

Smiled.

A smile so confident it could have floated a ship.

“Script?” he said, tapping his forehead. “Everything is here.”

Aatish blinked.

Babloo blinked harder.

“You mean… there is no script?” Aatish clarified, slowly, like someone checking whether a bomb was ticking.

“My brother,” Saqib said, placing a dramatic hand on his chest, “you do not cage genius with paper.”

Aatish stared. Babloo stared. A silence formed—the kind that usually precedes either enlightenment or a street fight.

"So how will we know what to do?" Aatish finally asked.

Saqib spread his arms. "Cinema is life! Life is unpredictable! Therefore, film must also be unpredictable! We improvise. We feel. We flow."

Babloo whispered, "We're dead."

But Aatish—ah, Aatish had been in the industry long enough to recognize one important truth:

Men with no plan often have the strongest conviction.

He inhaled deeply.

Smiled back.

"Alright," he said. "Let's flow."

The next morning, Dhaka greeted them with the same enthusiastic honking orchestra. A van picked them up—technically a van, though it was held together by tape, hope, and at least three prayers. They arrived at the film set... and immediately wished they hadn't.

The set looked like someone had once seen Star Wars... in a dream... while sick with fever... and then tried to recreate it from memory using cardboard, kitchen foil, and leftover wedding decorations.

There was a spaceship—actually, an old refrigerator box painted silver, with "GALACTIC CRUISER 1" written in permanent marker (spelled GELACTIK). Plastic buckets hung from ropes for "control panels." Someone had glued old

keyboard buttons onto a cricket bat and called it a "hyperdrive."

Aatish stared. Babloo stared even harder.

"This looks like the budget ran away halfway through construction," Babloo whispered.

Saqib arrived dramatically, wearing a cloak that was definitely a bathroom towel.

"Welcome, my actors! Today, we create history!"

Aatish tried to remain professional. "So where's my costume?"

A production assistant promptly handed him something that was either a spacesuit... or a raincoat wearing an identity crisis. It was shiny, purple, and made a whispering sound every time he moved. The helmet was a painted motorcycle helmet. The laser gun looked suspiciously like a hairdryer with LEDs glued on.

"This is... futuristic?" Aatish asked.

Saqib clapped. "Futuristic post-human cosmic rebellion era! Very advanced!"

Aatish pulled the visor down. It immediately fogged up.

He could see NOTHING.

"Action!" Saqib shouted, before anyone knew what scene they were doing.

Extras ran in all directions. Someone fell off a cardboard tower. A smoke machine coughed out exactly two seconds of smoke before giving up on life. A laser gun prop melted in the sun.

Aatish, blind and sweating inside the helmet, raised the hairdryer-laser with dignity and delivered his heroic line:

"Take me to... whoever is in charge of... space?"

Saqib yelled applauses.

Babloo whispered to himself, "Yep. We're making history all right."

The shoot wrapped for the day just as the sun dipped behind the dusty rooftops of Dhaka, staining the sky with a deep, bruised orange. The thermocol castle now looked even more tired, like it desperately wanted to retire. Extras dispersed, the assistant directors yelled last-minute reminders, and Saqib Ali paced around planning tomorrow's epic "Intergalactic Wedding Song Sequence" with the seriousness of someone planning an Apollo mission.

Aatish stepped outside the set—into a quiet patch near the boundary where a few trees stood like old witnesses. Fatima,the lead heroine of the movie, a princess of the far world,was already there, sitting on an overturned wooden crate, peeling the silver paint off her hands. Without the princess costume and cosmic stare, she just looked... human. Tired. A little weary.

He sat down beside her. Not too close. Not too far.

They didn't speak at first. There was a comfort in the shared silence of two people who have spent the entire day pretending to be something else.

Finally, Fatima spoke, "You know... everyone thinks actors are always performing. But sometimes it's in these quiet moments that we're most ourselves."

Aatish nodded. He took off his sunglasses—indoors, outdoors, sadness, happiness: they had become a permanent fixture—but now he set them aside. His eyes looked softer than usual. Older.

Aatish said, "When I started... I thought being an actor meant applause. Flashbulbs. Those giant hoardings. I used to practice signing autographs at home. I thought once I made it, everything would make sense."

Fatima let out a low laugh.

Not mocking. Just knowing.

"I thought acting would save me. I thought it would explain it to the world. But I think... sometimes we become actors because we don't know how to explain ourselves any other way," Fatima replied with a smile

There was a long pause.

Aatish curiously asked, "Do you love it? Acting?"

Fatima didn't answer immediately.

She looked up at the sky. There were no stars—just haze and faraway city lights—but she looked as if she could see constellations, maybe entire galaxies.

"I don't know if I love it. But I need it. It's the only place where... Everything makes sense. In real life, I don't always know what to feel. But in a scene, the emotions have a name. A direction," Fatima answered.

Aatish exhaled slowly.

AATISH:"I think I reached a point where I forgot why I started. I started chasing... I don't know... validation? Stardom? And when that goes missing..."

He paused.

"It feels like you're disappearing."

Fatima turned to him—not with pity, not with sympathy, but with understanding.

"That doesn't mean you're finished. It just means you're at a point where you have to rediscover. Sometimes reinvention doesn't come from glory. Sometimes it comes from falling apart quietly," Fatima said with a grin on her face.

Aatish looked at her, genuinely looked at her, as if hearing something that finally made sense.

Aatish then said, "You think I can still become something?"

Fatima smiled, "You already became something once. Why can't it happen again? Maybe not the same way. But differently."

The wind rustled the leaves behind them. The world didn't change. But something inside him shifted a little. A loosening. A letting go.

No dramatic music.

No violins.

Just two human beings.

Actors.

Not stars.

Not sensations.

Not failures.

Just two people who once dreamed,

and were still dreaming—

quietly, stubbornly.

After canning some scenes, Saqib Ali calls it a day ,

Fatima said softly, "Let's go, I need to take some rest. Tomorrow we pretend to be intergalactic royalty again."

He laughed. She laughed too.

Aatish found a friend when he least expected it

Aatish drove back to his hotel and Fatima to her home.

Back there in Bombay, the shooting of *Rannbhoomi* was moving at full swing—by which we mean full chaos, full

confusion, and full creative improvisation that no scriptwriter had ever approved.

For Dhruv Kumar, the experience felt like waking up in a dream he wasn't fully convinced he deserved. Yesterday he was an extra squinting at stars from the far corner of the frame; today, assistants were running toward him with umbrellas, bottled water, and frantic reminders like, "Sir, please don't stand in the sun—your face is important now!"

As the lead, Dhruv discovered a whole new universe of privileges: a chair with his name on it (spelled wrong, but progress is progress), people fussing over his hair, and someone whose full-time job seemed to be saying, "Sir, shot ready."

And the chaos—oh, the chaos. Horses refused to run on cue. A junior artist fainted because he thought "period drama" meant they'd be shooting in winter. Someone accidentally set a prop hut on fire, and Santoshi, instead of panicking, calmly said, "Good. Keep rolling—we'll call it divine intervention."

Dhruv stood in the middle of it all, sword in hand, thinking:

Being the hero is definitely better than carrying a fake basket in the background.

Once While shooting an intense scene—Dhruv's character breaking into a British treasury—chaos unfolded with the precision of a circus accident. Dhruv was supposed to glide in like a vengeful shadow; instead he entered like someone trying not to step on a sleeping dog. The first take, he bumped into a

pillar. The second, he whispered "sorry" to the British guard he accidentally elbowed. The third, he forgot his line and stared into the camera as if asking it for help.

Rajkumar Santoshi called the cut with the calm rage of a man who had seen too much cinema, too many actors, and absolutely no gods.

He walked toward Dhruv and stopped inches away. "Dhruv," he said slowly, "you know what the scene is about?"

"Yes sir. Revolution. Freedom. Looting the British."

"Exactly. Now tell me... why do you look like you're entering a bank to ask for a loan?"

Dhruv blinked. "I'm... nervous?"

Santoshi raised a hand. "No no no. Nervous is what you feel when your landlord asks why the tap is still leaking. Here you're moments away from becoming a legend. This is not nervousness; this is destiny having a caffeine rush."

He paced around Dhruv, talking the way two men in a diner might casually discuss robbery, breakfast, and the meaning of life—all at once.

"Do you ever think?" Santoshi mused, "about why revolutionaries always look cool while doing dangerous things? It's because they commit. Full commitment. No hesitation. Like when you see a plate of fries and you know it's yours."

Dhruv nodded, as if this made perfect historical sense.

Santoshi leaned in. “Right now, the British Empire is your fries. But you’re acting like you’re dieting. Stop dieting. Go full appetite.”

Suddenly, something in Dhruv’s brain snapped into place—logic or madness, no one knew. He stepped back into the set, eyes sharp, posture steady, channeling the confidence of a man who believes fate owes him interest.

Action.

Dhruv performed the scene with a fire that shocked everyone: intense, focused, and for the first time, convincingly heroic.

Santoshi exhaled with relief. “See?” he said. “All it takes is a little philosophy… and hunger.”

During the break, Dhruv flopped onto a crate, trying to catch his breath, when Soniya Mehra walked over—cool, composed, and looking like the dust and heat had signed an NDA forbidding them from touching her.

Soniya, daughter of the legendary 60s superstar Rajan Mehra, had debuted five years ago. The industry still treated her like a museum exhibit—“Handle with care, celebrity lineage.” She’d done four films, two item numbers, one disastrous historical soap cameo, and had somehow emerged with her eyeliner intact.

Dhruv looked at her and sighed dramatically. “You’re seriously lucky, you know. Born with a silver spoon. Must be… convenient.”

Soniya snorted, then gave him a sarcastic grin. "Silver spoon? Darling, that's a full-time job. You know how tiring it is being the only one in the room who isn't eating with a regular steel spoon?"

Dhruv frowned. "Meaning?"

"It means," she said, plopping beside him, "everyone thinks I'm floating through life because Papa was a 60s icon. Directors expect magic, audiences expect perfection, and the press expects scandals. If I trip on set, headlines say 'Rajan Mehra's daughter stumbles like her father did in *Dil Ki Dhadkan*, 1967.'"

Dhruv burst out laughing. "That's... absurd."

"Oh, very. Once someone compared my yawn to Papa's trademark dramatic yawn. I didn't even know he had one."

They shared a laugh.

"Look," Soniya said, nudging him, "silver spoon or steel spoon... we're both sweating here pretending to rob the British. That's equality in action."

Dhruv raised his coffee cup. "To spoons of all kinds."

She clinked her bottle. "Cheers. Now fix your hair. It looks like a mutiny gone wrong."

The shoot finally wrapped for the day, and Dhruv dragged himself back to his 2BHK apartment in Juhu—a luxury that still felt surreal to him. Just a year ago he'd been sharing a chawl room with a lizard named Dinesh who refused to pay rent. Now he had a balcony, a semi-functional washing machine, and

neighbors who pretended not to know him but definitely have an idea about him through the cheap filmy magazines.

Inside, Raju greeted him like a proud mother and an underpaid assistant rolled into one. The man had upgraded from spotboy to manager, and he carried the title like it was a national award.

"Bhai, joint ready," Raju said, handing over two perfectly rolled masterpieces. He said it with the reverence of a priest offering prasad.

Dhruv accepted them like a king accepting tribute. "Raju, probably you're the only manager in Bollywood whose primary job is rolling joints."

"Sir," Raju corrected smugly, "*manager ka kaam hota hai stress kam karna. Main wohi kar raha hoon.*"

Good karma, Raju believed. Stars don't forget favors, Dhruv insisted.

Dhruv stepped out onto the balcony, lit the joint, and sucked in a long drag. The city glittered beneath him—cars honking, buildings glowing, dreams collapsing and growing in rotation. Anyone watching might imagine he was contemplating life, legacy, the price of stardom, the revolution of art.

In reality, his brain had reduced itself to mushy popcorn.

What should I eat for dinner?

That was his grand philosophical dilemma.

He squinted at the skyline like it held answers.

Chinese? Too heavy. Pizza? Too cheesy. Dal-chawal? Too middle class for a lead actor... or maybe that makes it ironically cool?

Raju appeared beside him. "what you thinking?"

Dhruv exhaled dramatically, as if pondering existential truth.

"Bro... biryani or noodles?"

Raju nodded gravely. "Life-changing decision."

Dhruv took another drag. "Exactly."

The city hummed below. Revolution in films by day, food crises by night.

A hero's life is not that easy.

Before crashing into bed, Dhruv did what any newly-minted hero with a slightly inflated ego and a very inflated phone bill would do—he picked up his brand-new landline. Installing it felt like achieving adulthood. Or at least the Bollywood version of adulthood.

He dialed Gita's number, half-expecting the phone to spark or explode because it still didn't feel real that he had something as luxurious as a home phone.

She answered on the second ring.

"Hello?"

Dhruv grinned instantly. "It's me. Your favorite rising star."

“Ah,” Gita replied, “so you finally learned how to use a landline. Congratulations. Truly, society evolves.”

Dhruv lay back on his bed, already smiling like a fool. “How was your day?”

“Peaceful,” she said. “Until now.”

He laughed. “I missed you.”

“That’s just the smoke talking,” she teased.

“No, really,” he said. “I shot an action scene today. Risked my life. Fumbled dialogue. Got yelled at. Very heroic.”

“Sounds dramatic. You sure you weren’t just tripping over your own costume again?”

He covered his face. “That was ONE TIME.”

“Twice,” she corrected.

Her laughter floated through the receiver, warm and familiar.

After having some lovey dovey talks,they bid adieu to each other

“Goodnight, Dhruv.”

“Goodnight, Gita. Dream of your stylishly snoring superstar.”

She hung up, but Dhruv kept smiling in the dark.

Love, he decided, was the only thing sweeter than fame—

and considerably cheaper than installing a landline.

Lying in bed, Dhruv stared at the ceiling fan spinning like it was trying to take off without filing the proper paperwork. His life—if he really thought about it—felt suspiciously like someone else's story that he had accidentally walked into.

Kanpur wasn't tragic; it was just... ordinary. A simple house, predictable days, dreams that felt too big for the lanes he grew up in. Then came Bombay: sleeping on borrowed mattresses, being an extra who died so many times on screen he wondered if his spirit should start paying rent, running in the background of scenes where even the trees got more close-ups than him.

And now?

Now he was the lead in not one but two films.

He lived in Juhu.

He had a manager.

He had a landline.

A man with a landline was either successful or over 70—and Dhruv wasn't the latter.

He blinked at the ceiling.

"Is this real? Or did someone spike my vada pav months ago?"

Everything felt absurd.

But for once, beautifully absurd.

Bangladesh, meanwhile, was preparing to launch Aatish Kapoor into space—or at least into whatever space looked like on a budget that could barely afford extra batteries for the camera.

The set of **Love in Akashganga** was a fever dream stitched together with enthusiasm, duct tape, and whatever Saqib Ali called "vision." On paper, the film sounded like the illegitimate love child of Star Wars and The Sound of Music, conceived during a power cut. Spaceships floated suspiciously like repainted fishing boats. Aliens wore sequins. And somewhere in the middle of it all, Aatish—Bollywood's faded prince—was supposed to find true love among the stars.

The director, Saqib Ali—known in the Bangladeshi press as "the Steven Spielberg of Bangladesh"—looked less like Spielberg and more like someone God had made from leftover Spielberg scraps: a beard that never fully committed, half-moon glasses, and the manic energy of a man who believed he was changing world cinema, one wobbly spaceship at a time.

"Action!" Saqib yelled.

Aatish stood in front of a green screen so wrinkled it looked like it had developed depression. He was dressed in a silver jumpsuit so tight it might have endangered his future family line. His job in this scene?

Run in slow motion while an invisible asteroid (to be drawn later by Saqib's nephew, who "was good at MS Paint") narrowly missed him.

Aatish began running.

"Slower!" Saqib shouted.

Aatish slowed down.

"No, even slower! You are escaping doom, not rushing for a sale!"

Then came the action sequence: Aatish had to duel an alien warrior whose costume looked like a rejected Durga Puja decoration—glitter everywhere, antennas drooping with existential fatigue.

The alien swung a foam sword so softly a toddler wouldn't bruise.

Aatish had no idea where to react, so he just screamed heroically in all directions.

Saqib clasped his hands.

"Brilliant! The confusion! The cosmic fear! Oscar-level!"

Aatish had absolutely no clue what he was doing.

But then again, nobody else did either.

And that, somehow, was the magic of ***Love in Akashganga.***

Days drifted by in Bangladesh like mildly confused clouds—slow, uneven, and unsure where they were supposed to be. And strangely, against all logic and self-respect, Aatish Kapoor began to enjoy himself.

What started as a humiliating career detour slowly turned into a bizarre, chaotic comfort zone.

For one, he developed a deep, emotional connection with hilsa fish. The first time he tasted it, he nearly cried—not because it was delicious, but because he hadn't expected a single fish to have so many bones. By his fifth attempt, however, he was cleaning hilsa with the confidence of a man performing surgery. The locals looked at him approvingly, as if he were finally becoming a real Bangladeshi by spirit (or by digestive trauma).

On set, the madness continued. Spaceships still wobbled. Aliens still shed glitter. The green screen still looked like it needed therapy. But Aatish?

He started... laughing. At everything.

At Saqib Ali shouting, "Give me more cosmic longing!"

At the assistant director tripping over a prop moon.

At the hero's entry shot where he had to jump from a ladder and pretend it was "zero gravity" (which really just made him look like he had mild constipation).

Every day brought a new absurdity.

One day, Saqib introduced an alien baby that looked suspiciously like a stolen toy doll dipped in blue paint.

Another day, a fight scene was delayed because the prop "laser gun" went missing—only to be found in the hands of a neighborhood kid playing space-robbers.

Yet through all the nonsense, Aatish found something he hadn't felt in years: lightness.

No pressure. No gossip columns. No competition.

Just him, a wobbly spaceship, a fish with too many bones, and a film so ridiculous it looped back into being charming.

For the first time in ages, Aatish Kapoor wasn't performing.

He was simply living.

After six months of cosmic confusion, alien mishaps, collapsing spaceships, and more glitter than a unicorn's funeral, the impossible finally happened:

The shooting of **Love in Aakashganga** was over.

The final day was supposed to be "grand," "epic," and "emotionally explosive"—which in Saqib Ali's dictionary meant "dangerously ambitious with a non-zero chance of actual manslaughter."

The climax fight scene featured Rustom—Aatish Kapoor in a plastic chest plate that looked like it had been stolen from a child's Iron Man costume—battling the evil warlord Zubisko, whose outfit suggested that Party City had a "Rejected Darth Vader" clearance section. Zubisko's "laser sword" flickered pathetically because the batteries were dying, much like everyone's will to live. The sound effects were heroically provided by a background boy who kept shouting "pew pew!" with the kind of dedication usually reserved for cult members.

Still, Aatish gave it his all—which, given the circumstances, was borderline masochistic.

He leapt, spun, kicked, and dramatically screamed like a man being audited by the tax department, which was impressive considering he was teetering on a wobbly platform meant to simulate a "floating meteor" but mostly simulated a lawsuit waiting to happen. When he finally "stabbed" Zubisko (read: gently poked him so the Velcro would unstick like the world's least threatening assassination), the villain fell with such theatrical enthusiasm he knocked over half the set, including the model planet Jupiter—which, in a cosmic irony, finally achieved the destruction it had been threatening since day one.

Jupiter's death would not be mourned.

Then came the grand romantic finale:

Rustom and the heroine dancing "among the stars"—a poetic description of two interns on ladders yeeting glitter like they were salting a particularly large driveway—before walking into a sunset "specially imported from a faraway universe," also known as a painted cloth on wheels that had clearly seen better decades. It jammed halfway through, forcing the couple to spend a full thirty seconds awkwardly walking in place like the world's saddest treadmill commercial, until someone with functioning brain cells pushed it.

When the director finally yelled "Cut!", the crew erupted in applause—not out of emotion, but the kind of primal relief usually reserved for hostages being released. A few clapped because they were genuinely excited to return home and confirm to their families that no, they had not been abducted by aliens, just employed by someone who might as well be one.

Saqib Ali, Bangladesh's discount Spielberg with delusions of Kubrick, stood before his exhausted soldiers with trembling lips and glistening eyes. He wanted to deliver an emotional speech about art, struggle, vision, and how filmmaking was a spiritual calling—possibly because actual religious institutions had rejected him.

He opened his mouth...

...and wisely closed it.

Everyone looked like they would sell a kidney, possibly both kidneys, and maybe a lung on the black market just to escape this soundstage and never hear the word "retake" again.

So he simply placed a hand on his chest with the solemnity of a man accepting a nonexistent Oscar and declared with the absolute seriousness of someone who genuinely believed it:

"This film... will shatter every box-office record in Bangladesh. Even *Dil Dhaka Dhaka Kore* will fall to its knees and weep. Mark my words."

It was the kind of confidence that could only come from a director with a string of hits behind him—or a severe head injury. Possibly both.

Aatish smiled, exhausted but weirdly proud, like a survivor of a natural disaster who'd somehow bonded with the rubble.

After all, he had survived six months inside a fever dream directed by a madman with a glitter budget...

...and somehow, against all logic and self-preservation instincts, he didn't completely hate it.

Stockholm Syndrome, he thought, is a hell of a drug.

That night, the completion of **Love in Aakashganga** was celebrated in style—or as close to style as six months of glitter explosions, collapsing sets, and malfunctioning spaceships could allow. Saqib Ali hosted a small party at one of the best hotels in Dhaka.

Important crew members trickled in: set designers with glue-stained hands and trust issues, camera operators who now had permanent squints from trying to film through smoke machines (or was it just cataracts?), and costume assistants who had learned to survive by eating leftover glitter—it's high in fiber, apparently.

The food was lavish—steaming hilsha fish (bones included, naturally), aromatic biryanis that could wake the dead, and desserts so fancy you needed a PhD to pronounce them. Drinks flowed, sparkling like tiny galaxies in crystal glasses, or possibly just really enthusiastic soda water.

Aatish Kapoor arrived, sunglasses firmly in place—yes, at night, because when your career is this dim, you need all the shade you can get. Babloo followed, grinning like a child who'd finally discovered the hotel's all-you-can-eat buffet had a second floor. Fatima Bano, the heroine, glided in looking regal yet amused, already mentally preparing her standard response

to "How was space dancing?"—a question she'd be answering until the heat death of the actual universe.

After a couple of drinks—or five, the line between courage and inebriation now as blurred as the CGI alien backgrounds—Saqib Ali tapped the microphone. Silence fell like a poorly rigged spaceship prop.

"Friends," he began, voice serious but eyes twinkling like a malfunctioning LED, "we have spent six months turning chaos into... slightly more organized chaos. We launched spaceships that had shorter lifespans than mayflies. We wielded laser swords that couldn't cut through butter. We defied gravity—mostly because our wires kept snapping. And yet... here is Aatish Kapoor, who came all the way from Bombay to bless us with his presence."

In reality, Aatish had come because his phone had stopped ringing louder than a black hole, but nobody needed those pesky details.

Saqib continued, getting misty-eyed, "In all this beautiful madness, I will miss each of you. The late nights are fueled by questionable tea. The glitter explosions that still haunt my sinuses. The constant threat of alien props achieving sentience and staging a coup. Every ridiculous second was worth it. You are the reason **Love in Aakashganga** exists—for better or worse. And for that, I am either grateful or insane. Possibly both."

Applause erupted. Some crew members wiped imaginary tears from their eyes. Others wiped real glitter—that stuff never leaves.

Then Saqib invited Aatish to say a few words. Aatish, still sporting sunglasses like a commitment to the bit, took the mic. "Thank you, everyone. Working in Bangladesh has been... unforgettable. Like food poisoning, but in a good way. The chaos, the hilsha fish with its million bones, the zero-gravity dances that defied physics and common sense, the exploding stars that nearly took out our insurance coverage—it's been absolutely mental. I'll be staying here a while longer."

What nobody knew: Aatish's real reason for staying was to quietly supervise post-production, making sure the editors didn't accidentally turn his romantic hero into a space potato.

Laughter shook the room like another set collapse. Drinks clinked. Glitter sparkled everywhere—in hair, on clothes, probably in someone's lungs. The party rolled on, messy, chaotic, and completely perfect—the kind of night that only a low-budget space opera could earn. Or survive.

After the party wrapped up and everyone drifted away into Dhaka's humid night, Aatish shot Babloo a smirk—that smirk. The one that meant trouble, mischief, and very bad decision-making dressed as philosophy.

Babloo's shoulders dropped.

"Sir... no."

Aatish stretched his arms like a yogi about to preach.

"It's been months since we smoked up, Babloo. The soul needs... relaxation."

"In Dhaka?" Babloo whispered, horrified.

Aatish tapped his temple.

"Holy herb grows everywhere. And only the seekers find it."

Fuck your philosophy, you're just a stoner with an encyclopedia in your brain, Babloo thought, deadpan.

They stepped out of the hotel into a 3 AM Dhaka—sticky heat, buzzing street lights, and the occasional goat wandering like it had just been kicked out of a bar.

Aatish announced with the confidence of a man who'd seen too many adventure films,

"The best way to find ganja in an unknown city? Ask the rickshaw pullers. They know every gutter and back alley."

So they searched. After ten minutes, they spotted a rickshaw puller asleep, folded into his vehicle like a human samosa.

Aatish signaled.

Babloo reluctantly approached and tapped.

The man jerked awake and roared,

"*Ke tui re khankichele*?!"

(Who the hell are you, bastard boy?!)

Aatish stepped forward serenely.

"Just a seeker seeking redemption."

The rickshaw puller stared at him, squinting like he was trying to identify a particularly suspicious species of insect.

"...I know you. You dance in those stupid Hindi movies wearing red pants like a circus monkey. Our movies are better."

Aatish, wounded but desperate, swallowed his pride and asked,

"Where can we get ganja?"

The man's face lit up.

"Disco Rafiq."

"We don't want the address of a disco," Babloo muttered.

"It's not a disco, you Bombay fool. It's the name of the best ganja seller in this area."

"Why such a ridiculous name?" Aatish asked.

The rickshaw puller puffed up like a proud parent.

" Well,the Disco comes from Mithun Chokroborty's blockbuster movie Disco Dancer. He worships Mithun da. Bengali pride! The only good Bollywood actor. Could have surpassed Amitabh Bachchan—but politics ruined everything. Conspiracy!

Aatish nodded as he didn't have any other option except from accepting the deep analysis of Bombay film industry by a rickshaw puller of Dhaka.

"And Rafiq?" Babloo asked.

"That's his damn birth name, what else? You think his mother named him Disco? Idiots."

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"I can take you. But 50 taka."

Aatish agreed instantly, like a man with no survival instinct.

The rickshaw rattled through claustrophobic alleys—each narrower and more ominous than the last—until they reached a crumbling house that looked like it was being held upright purely by stubbornness and spite.

"This is it," the rickshaw puller announced, then pedaled away at Olympic speed, clearly wanting no photographic evidence of his involvement.

The rickshaw screeched to a halt in front of a house that looked like even termites had resigned from duty.

A lone tube-light flickered at the door like it was dying of boredom.

Babloo whispered, “This place looks like it sells ghosts, not ganja.”

Aatish grinned, “Good ganja always comes from shady places. It’s the law of the universe.”

Before Babloo could reply, the door banged open and two men staggered out — one so thin he could slip through a keyhole, the other so broad he looked like he arm-wrestled water buffaloes for entertainment. Both stared at Aatish and Babloo with suspicion.

Aatish didn't help the situation.

He stood there wearing a bright floral shirt, tight trousers, and sunglasses at 3 AM, looking like a runaway disco performer who took a wrong turn at the border.

The thin one blinked. "What do you two want?"

Aatish cleared his throat. "We're looking for ganja. A rickshaw puller told us this is where we'd find Disco Rafiq. Said he sells the best stuff in Dhaka."

The one who looked like a wrestler narrowed his eyes. "Lies. These two look too polished. Too shiny. Too... moisturized."

The first guy stepped closer. "They're cops. I can feel it. Police spies."

The wrestler type shook his head bitterly. "Police have no honesty left. Even after taking money, they want more. Wouldn't surprise me if they sent spies."

Aatish raised his hands. "We're not cops! We're customers!"

The first one jabbed a finger at him. "You're wearing sunglasses at night. That's suspicious."

Aatish pushed his hair back. "It's called style."

The wrestler type whispered and took out a pistol from behind and aimed at them, "Definitely police. Only undercover agents try this hard to be cool."

Babloo sighed in defeat. “Wonderful. We’re going to get killed because sir here decided to dress like a midnight peacock.”

They shoved them inside the house. It was dark except for a single bulb swinging like it had PTSD. Posters of Mithun Chakraborty were plastered on the walls — every era, every hairstyle, every dance pose.

Babloo whispered, “Is this a drug den or a Mithun museum?”

The thin one pushed them into chairs. “Talk. Who sent you? CID? Bangladesh Special Force? International anti-narcotics?”

Aatish sighed. “I’m an actor, man. Bollywood. You might’ve seen my films.”

Both henchmen paused.

The wrestler type squinted. “Bollywood? No no... we watch only Hollywood. Nicolas Cage. Van Damme. True cinema.”

The thin one nodded. “In Bollywood everyone cries too much.”

Aatish looked personally offended. “I don’t cry in all films.”

Babloo muttered, “You cried like a baby in your last movie, once during an emotional scene and once when the movie was declared a disaster!”.

Before Aatish could punch him, the sound of footsteps echoed. Slow, deliberate. Dramatic — like a villain making an entrance in an 80s movie.

A man stepped into the light.

Sideburns sharp enough to cut butter. Shirt open till the chest, revealing three gold chains. Bell-bottoms glittering. Hair slicked back with ambition. And a smile like he was permanently posing for a poster.

"Who," he said, raising one eyebrow, "has disturbed the empire of Disco Rafiq?"

The henchmen straightened like schoolboys.

"Boss, these two look suspicious," Toothpick declared.

Rafiq stared at Aatish. His mouth fell open.

"No... no way..." he whispered. "Are you... Aatish? From *Dil Ka Dariya?"*

Aatish smirked like he finally found someone with taste. "The one and only."

The henchmen gasped.

The wrestler type mumbled, "Oh shit... boss is having a religious moment."

Rafiq walked forward, touched Aatish's face like it was a holy relic.

"I knew it! I knew it was you! Your hairstyle in *Dil Ka Dariya*... masterpiece. I tried it for six months. The neighborhood kids called me 'Wet Chicken Rafiq,' but it was worth it."

Aatish adjusted his collar proudly. "Audiences nowadays don't appreciate sincere cinema."

“Exactly!” Rafiq shouted. “Your last three movies flopped because people have no class. I watched *Jeene Nahi Dunga* thrice.”

Babloo blinked. “Someone watched it three times? Voluntarily?”

Rafiq glared. “Silence, sidekick.”

He snapped his fingers. The henchmen instantly untied Aatish, offering him water, a chair pillow, even a foot massage.

“Bring the special stash,” Rafiq ordered. “The Himalayan Storm.”

Babloo whispered, “Why is ganja named like it’s performing at WrestleMania?”

Moments later, Rafiq placed a packet wrapped so neatly it looked like a gift from Santa Claus’ illegal cousin.

They sat down and rolled a few joints.

They smoked.

They coughed.

They levitated spiritually.

Rafiq leaned back, laughing, “Today… I smoke with my hero. Bangladesh respects talent!”

Aatish exhaled in bliss. “It feels good to have fans abroad… even if it’s just one… and even if he’s Disco Rafiq.”

When they finally left, Rafiq himself escorted them back on his Ambassador car— his henchmen tagging along loyal puppies.

As they reached the hotel, Rafiq saluted dramatically, “If ever you need ganja, hideout, or someone killed — call Disco Rafiq.”

Aatish nodded. “Just the first one.”

Rafiq winked. “One day you’ll need the other two also.”

He vanished away into the night, singing I Am a Disco Dancer off-key.

Babloo shook his head. “Sir, only you can turn a kidnapping into a fan meet-and-smoke session.”

Aatish grinned. “What can I say? Art has power.”

In a few days Post-production for ***Love in Aakashganga*** began with full swing, which is a polite way of saying three people were trapped in a room that smelled like despair and Cup Noodles, watching footage that could only be described as "a fever dream directed by a concussed peacock."

Aatish sat in the back, arms crossed, staring at the monitor like a man watching his own autopsy.

The editor hit pause.

On screen: Aatish, in a full astronaut suit, kneeling in a field, delivering a tearful monologue about cosmic destiny… to a buffalo. A silver buffalo with a cosmic lineage. Someone had spray-painted it. Badly. You could still see patches of brown near the tail.

Aatish blinked. "Why is there a buffalo?"

The director didn't look up. "Metaphor."

"For what?"

"You'll know when the reviews come out."

Cut to the next scene. Aatish, slow-motion dancing through a field of balloons. Romantic. Dreamy. Except the balloons weren't floating — they were hanging from visible ropes like a hostage situation at a children's birthday party. And Aatish's dance moves looked less "Bollywood hero" and more "man being attacked by invisible bees."

Aatish rubbed his face. "Why am I flailing like that?"

The editor shrugged. "That was a good take. The other one you tripped into the camera."

Then came the climax. The big fight. Aatish in a glittering silver spacesuit — why was everything silver? — taking on ten goons in what was clearly supposed to be an alien ship but looked more like someone's uncle's wedding tent. Half the villains were visibly slipping on the floor. One guy went down like he'd stepped on a banana peel. Another was just… gone. Off-screen. You could hear him groaning.

"What happened there?" Aatish pointed.

"Lassi spill," the assistant muttered. "Day three. Never cleaned it up."

Aatish stared at the screen. His character roundhouse-kicked a man who wasn't even looking at him. The punch sound effect was three seconds late.

He exhaled slowly. "So… should I be embarrassed or, like… proud?"

The director finally turned around, grinning like a man who'd just set fire to his own car for the insurance money.

"Neither, my friend. Something is cooking."

"What is cooking?"

"No clue. But I can smell it."

Aatish leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling tiles.

Good or bad didn't matter anymore.

This movie was going to be unforgettable.

For all the wrong reasons.

Or maybe — just maybe — all the right ones.

Either way, someone was going to jail or Cannes.

Probably jail.

Bombay, meanwhile, was buzzing like a pressure cooker without a lid. **Rannbhoomi**'s shooting was in full swing — horses running, swords clashing, stuntmen flying like discount superheroes. Dhruv Kumar barely had time to breathe before

he was whisked away to another set, because Gulshan Kumar had just greenlit his next musical romance: *Pyaar Hain Tumse.*

A new heroine had been introduced — Jiya Sen, fresh out of Kolkata, armed with dimples, innocence, and the ability to cry on cue without glycerine. Dhruv wasn't sure whether he was impressed or terrified.

In the T-Series studio, the legendary Nadeem–Shravan were crafting heartbreak anthems with the ease of men making morning tea. Every song sounded like the national anthem of "Broken hearted Romeos." Gulshan Kumar walked in, eyes sparkling like he had discovered gold.

"These songs," he declared dramatically, "will become the heartbeat of FOSLA!"

Dhruv blinked. "Of what?"

"FOSLA," Gulshan Kumar repeated proudly, as if announcing NASA. "Frustrated One-Sided Lovers' Association."

Dhruv frowned. "That's... real?"

"Oh very real," Gulshan said. "Half of India is a member. The other half is the reason the first half is frustrated."

Dhruv nodded politely, unsure whether to laugh or sign up.

Then came the director — Jimmy Bottlewala, a nervous-looking man in oversized glasses and a kurta that could be used as curtains. He had assisted Mahesh Bhatt during *Aashiqui*,

and Gulshan Kumar firmly believed this credential alone guaranteed a superhit.

Jimmy cleared his throat. "My vision is pure emotion. Pure pain. Pure tragic romance."

Gulshan beamed. "Exactly what FOSLA wants!"

Dhruv sighed. Between battling warriors in *Rannbhoomi* and preparing to romance Jiya Sen in the rain for *Pyaar Hain Tumse*, he felt his brain splitting into two genres.

Action here. Emotion there.

Somewhere in between... Dhruv Kumar was just trying not to go insane.

Gulshan Kumar asked Dhruv to come to his house for script narration where the other cast and crew of *Pyaar Hain Tumse* will also come.

Dhruv Kumar reached Gulshan Kumar's residence for the script narration of *Pyaar Hain Tumse,* and the moment he stepped in, he felt like he had entered a place where devotion had married melodrama and produced twins. At the entrance stood a towering Lord Shiva temple, glowing with enough diyas to light up half of Andheri during a power cut. Inside, the walls were plastered with posters of Gulshan Kumar's past hits — devotional albums, romantic albums, heartbreak albums... basically everything except horror, because the only horror Gulshan believed in was flop movies.

Dhruv whispered to himself, “This house looks like a mandir sponsored by heartbreak.”

Before he could process the dècor further, Jimmy Bottlewala walked in. A stack of papers hugged to his chest, sweating like the script was radioactive. Behind him entered Jiya Sen, elegant in a sky-blue suit, and then Nadeem–Shravan, looking calm, saintly, and slightly bored — the facial expression of men who had composed blockbusters in their sleep.

Everyone settled in the hall as Jimmy cleared his throat dramatically and began narrating.

“So our hero, Prem—”

Dhruv interrupted instantly. “Prem? Isn’t that Salman Khan’s department?”

Gulshan Kumar shot him a look so sharp it could slice onions.

“Nobody,” he said in a low, dangerous tone, “has copyright on the name Prem.”

Dhruv shut up like a good boy.

Jimmy continued. “Prem is an aspiring singer. He always roams with a guitar.”

Dhruv wondered why all aspiring singers in Hindi films treat guitars like life-support machines.

“And Pooja,” Jimmy said, gesturing to Jiya, “is the daughter of a rich businessman.”

Dhruv sighed internally. Why is the hero always poor and the heroine rich? Is this a movie or an economics chapter?

Jimmy carried on enthusiastically. "There are six songs, including an item number with Kimi Katkar. Then there's Prem's mother, played by Reema Lagoo. And Prem's sister, Sushma—"

Suddenly, a knock at the door.

Everyone turned. A girl in a simple salwar suit stepped in — Priya Sachdev. Bright eyes, calm smile, the kind of presence that made everything else in the room feel too loud.

Gulshan Kumar stood up proudly. "Come in, come in! Everyone, this is Priya Sachdev. She's playing Sushma — Prem's sister. Great actress. Theatre background. Some TV serials. Her first film."

Priya greeted everyone warmly. Dhruv nodded back, but inside he felt... something.

Bombay is full of beautiful girls, he told himself. But this one... there's something different. Something understated. Something real.

Jimmy continued the narration, but Dhruv barely heard the next lines. Something about Sushma helping Prem in tough moments. Something about a dramatic rain scene. Something about Prem singing on a cliff.

But Dhruv's eyes kept circling back to Priya.

Her polite smile.

Her composed presence.

And the way — unlike most people in Bombay — she didn't seem pretentious.

"Prem," Jimmy was saying as he flipped to the next page, "will then run through the streets with his guitar—"

Of course he will, Dhruv thought. Everyone in this movie seems to run — from heartbreak, from villains, from logic.

Gulshan Kumar clapped his hands once. "Beautiful! Pure emotion! FOSLA will love it!"

Dhruv leaned back on the sofa.

A devotional mansion, a musical love story, a guitar-obsessed poor hero, a rich heroine, six songs, and an item number.

And Priya.

The narration continued, but Dhruv had a feeling:

This film was going to change something in his life — and not just his career.

Dhruv Kumar's life had officially turned into a cinematic circus — two films, two worlds, two identities, and one deeply confused soul stuck somewhere between revolution and romance.

On the sets of *Rannbhoomi*, he was Ranga, the intense revolutionary with wild eyes, dust-coated face, ripped kurta, and the kind of anger that could burn down the British Empire.

On the sets of *Pyaar Hain Tumse*, he was Prem, the soft-hearted singer who looked like he showered twice a day, applied hair serum, and was always two seconds away from bursting into a melody — sometimes even when nobody asked.

The method actor inside Dhruv... was crying.

One morning, he'd be crouched behind a tree, holding a fake rifle, Rajkumar Santoshi yelling, "Ranga! You must FEEL the hunger of the revolution!"

Dhruv, eyes blazing, would scream, "Jai Hind!"

Cut to two hours later — he's in Film City wearing a spotless white shirt, holding a guitar he did not know how to tune, while Jimmy Bottlewala screamed from behind the camera,

"Prem! Smile! You're in love! Think of butterflies!"

Dhruv wanted to say he felt like punching butterflies.

The chaos only got worse.

There were days when he'd show up on *Rannbhoomi* clean-shaven with gelled hair, and Rajkumar Santoshi would scream,

"Why do you look like a shampoo advertisement? You're fighting the British, not attending a college fresher's party!"

Other days he'd arrive at *Pyaar Hain Tumse* with messy hair, bruised makeup still on, and Jimmy Bottlewala would panic,

"Prem can't look like he lost a boxing match right before confessing his love! Go wash your face! And moisturize!"

Dhruv started carrying two bags everywhere —

one with guns, dust powder, and fake blood...

and the other with combs, perfumes, and enough fairness cream to open a small shop.

One day, while shooting a tearful patriotic speech for *Rannbhoomi*, he was so deep into Ranga's pain that a lone tear rolled down his cheek.

Just then an assistant whispered,

"Sir, *Rannbhoomi* schedule is cancelled. You have to leave for the duet song, '*Tera Pyaar Mere Liye Ibaadat'.*

Dhruv turned slowly, still in revolutionary mode, and growled,

"I was about to free my country."

The assistant replied,

"Now you have to free your heart, sir."

Dhruv sighed.

From fighting British soldiers...

to singing on a boat with a guitar that kept slipping into the water.

His life was chaotic.

Pure, slapstick, David Dhawan movies level chaos.

But the cameras kept rolling — and somehow, so did he.

And yet, somehow — by sheer luck, joints and Raju's relentless scheduling — Dhruv managed to sail both boats without drowning.

He'd jump from guns to guitars, from freedom cries to falsettos, from "*Inquilab Zindabad!*" to "I love you, Pooja!" with the emotional whiplash of a man living two entirely different lives before lunch.

He developed a strange internal switch:

dust on face = rebellion,

perfume on neck = romance.

And though his brain often lagged behind his body, Dhruv discovered a strange truth —

no matter the genre, no matter the chaos...he was finally living the life he had once only dreamt of.

And there in Dhaka, Bangladesh—after two long months of post-production—**Love in Aakashganga** finally limped, crawled, and then triumphantly hopped to the finish line. Saqib Ali went in to watch the final edit with the editor, and when he walked out of the editing room, his face looked... different. Not normal-different—scientific breakthroughs are different.

He had the exact expression Newton probably had when the apple hit him, or the first caveman who rubbed two stones together and went, "Arre wah, free heater!"

Aatish stepped forward. "How's it?"

Saqib smiled so wide, one end was in Old Dhaka and the other was negotiating land rates in New Dhaka. “Classic bro... classic. But listen, I don’t wanna be that guy who high-fives himself in public. I’m keeping a private screening tomorrow with only a few selected geniuses. Watch it yourself and decide.”

Next evening, a tiny theatre hosted this top-secret screening. Both the leads were there, the actor who played Zubisko—the universe-destroying villain who looks like he destroys biryani plates with the same enthusiasm—and a few technicians like the cinematographer, editor, and sound designer, who all sat quietly like students waiting for exam results.

The lights dimmed. The projector whirred like it desperately needed therapy. And then—BAM!—the movie opened with a song so ambitious, even NASA would feel inferiority complex.

There they were: the two leads, dancing on the rings of Saturn like it was the world’s most expensive marriage mandap. The music? A mind-bending fusion of Rabindra Sangeet and death metal. Imagine Tagore gently singing about the beauty of life while a demon guitarist in the background screams, “BLOOOOOD MOONNNN!” at 200 decibels. The sound designer was already sweating.

The cinematographer leaned over and whispered, “Bro, is this cosmic romance or interplanetary puja remix?”

Meanwhile, the actor playing the villain Zubisko watched himself enter the frame riding a comet. He nodded seriously, as if this was the exact career path he always dreamed of. "Yes... this is art," he muttered, chest swelling with pride and maybe low oxygen.

Halfway through the sequence, Saturn's rings started vibrating like a malfunctioning washing machine. The hero attempted a slow-motion hair flip, but since there's no gravity, his hair floated up and got stuck like a confused halo.

By the end of the song, the audience wasn't sure if they watched a romance, a space opera, or a Bengali metal concert gone rogue. But one thing was clear: nobody in that room would ever listen to Rabindra Sangeet the same way again.

Before the audience could recover from Saturn's disco mandap, the film jumped straight into a scene where the leads were drifting through a glowing nebula that looked suspiciously like someone had spilled Holi colours across the universe. Zubisko's hologram popped up out of nowhere, ten times larger than necessary, yelling something about "saving the cosmos before it goes phutt!" His voice echoed like a loudspeaker in a bathroom. The heroine squinted and whispered, "Why is he shouting? It's a hologram, not a vegetable market."

Next, Rustom,the legendary intergalactic warrior played by Aatish Kapoor found himself trying to fight Zubisko on Jupiter's Great Red Spot—a storm spinning so fast the characters were supposedly doing action scenes at 200 km/hr.

Every punch the hero threw went flying somewhere into another district of the galaxy. Zubisko attempted an evil laugh, but the wind twisted it into a sound that resembled a choking dolphin. Someone in the theatre snorted loudly.

Then came the chase sequence: the lovers escaping on a scooter-shaped spaceship through the asteroid belt. Massive rocks flew around like angry flying potatoes while Zubisko chased them on a dragon-shaped battleship blaring Rabindra Sangeet dubstep. One asteroid even bounced off their windscreen like it was annoyed.

By the time Rustom delivered his big emotional dialogue—standing bravely on a floating rock above a black hole that politely told him to "relax, bro"—the entire theatre was in silent awe, trying to decide whether this was genius, madness, or both.

Whatever it was, Saqib Ali sat in the last row, smiling like a man who had just reinvented cinema or accidentally broken physics. Perhaps both.

But as the film staggered forward like a drunk astrologer predicting the future, something deeply disturbing occurred—the movie became... engrossing.

Not sensible. Not logical. Just... impossible to look away from.

It felt as if The Sound of Music had eloped with Star Wars during a total solar eclipse, and their forbidden child grew up reading outdated science textbooks and watching Bengali

musical dramas on Doordarshan. And instead of becoming a disaster, somehow—mysteriously, suspiciously—it became captivating.

A strange realisation crept over the room: cinema doesn't always have to be meaningful or enlightened. It can be as foolish as a man trying to dry his clothes in a cyclone, as mad as a politician giving weather predictions—but if it entertains, then mission accomplished. And **Love in Aakashganga** entertained in the most unholy, mesmerising way possible. The kind that makes you laugh, then question why you're laughing, then continue laughing because stopping might require self-reflection.

By the end, as the final credits rolled like a tired school teacher, Aatish sat frozen. He wasn't sure what emotion he was supposed to feel—admiration, confusion, mild existential crisis—but he was certain of one thing:

Whatever this film was... it wasn't ordinary.

It was gloriously, chaotically, magnificently different.

And then began the promotion of **Love in Aakashganga**—a campaign so bizarre even the 90s, the decade of dancing heroes in leather pants, wasn't prepared for it.

Aatish's first stop was a local college where he arrived dressed as an "intergalactic warrior." In reality, it was just a silver raincoat, gumboots, and a toy laser sword he bought from a footpath vendor who assured him it was "Japan quality." When he entered the auditorium, one student

whispered, “Is this a movie promotion or a fancy-dress competition?” Another replied, “Whatever it is, I’m staying.”

He attempted a heroic pose but the laser sword refused to switch on. He shook it, slapped it, even blew air into it like it was a stubborn transistor radio. Finally it lit up, made a noise like a dying mosquito, and the crowd erupted in applause.

Meanwhile, Saqib Ali appeared on a morning radio show claiming the film had “real galactic footage,” which the host politely did not question because even he had given up trying to understand.

The villain actor, still in Zubisko makeup, visited a sweet shop to promote the film and scared two customers who ran out leaving their jalebis behind.

The promotions were chaotic, confusing, and utterly unforgettable—perfectly matching the film itself.

After two weeks of promotions louder than a political rally with free biryani, **Love in Aakashganga** finally released. And what followed on Day 1 was nothing short of cosmic madness.

Theatres were mobbed. People climbed gates, broke queues, and one desperate gentleman even tried bribing the watchman with two Hilsa fish. Tickets vanished faster than common sense in election season. Black ticket rates shot so high that, for a brief moment, a flight to Kolkata was cheaper than a balcony seat.

By noon, the film had shattered every opening record ever set in Bangladesh. Some theatres reported houseful shows

before they even opened their shutters. It was a certified cultural riot—minus tear gas, plus popcorn.

Reviews started pouring in like monsoon floods. Several critics praised it as "Bangladesh's answer to Hollywood sci-fi" and declared Saqib Ali a fusion of George Lucas and Spielberg—basically a cosmic biryani of both.

But then came the pseudo-intellectual critics—the ones who masturbate over movies where farmers suffer for three hours while staring at a dying pumpkin. Naturally, they hated **Love in Aakashganga**. They gave it one star, wrote long lectures about "artistic integrity," and complained there wasn't enough existential suffering.

The audience, meanwhile, ignored them completely like your ex ignoring your calls... and kept storming theatres like it was a national duty.

With the film's release, Aatish Kumar exploded into superstardom—not gently, but like a pressure cooker that forgot physics. Overnight, Bangladesh discovered a new national obsession, and his face was everywhere: posters, magazines, pan shops, even one overenthusiastic tailor who stitched Aatish's smile onto a lungi.

Critics, naturally, were divided.

Some hailed him as "the divine incarnation sent to rescue Bangladeshi cinema from boredom, bad lighting, and budgets that could barely afford a cup of tea." One reviewer declared,

"If Tagore were alive today, he would abandon poetry altogether and write only about Aatish's slow-motion walk."

Some fans crowned him "the Amitabh Bachchan of Bangladesh," while others, clearly drunk on nationalism and hyperbole, argued the reverse—that Amitabh Bachchan was merely the Aatish Kapoor of India, born a little earlier and with Salim- Javed. Other critics were less charitable as one complained, "His expressions look like he is permanently constipated," while another wrote, "His clothes shine brighter than the sun. Watching him without sunglasses should be a punishable offence."

But who cared about critics? Critics don't buy tickets—people do.

And the people went mad.

College boys began copying Aatish's dialogue delivery, speaking every sentence with dramatic pauses so long teachers thought they were buffering. Markets ran out of shiny clothes—traders started importing cheap glitter fabric because the youth demanded to sparkle like Aatish. Girls sent him marriage proposals, some including photos, some including horoscopes, one even including an audio cassette where she confessed love in three languages.

Aatish, tempted, considered accepting "one or two"—purely for national service—but Babloo pulled him aside and said, "Bro, calm down. First learn to maintain one hair gel bottle properly before managing a wife."

And thus, superstardom settled on Aatish like an overexcited pigeon—loud, chaotic, and impossible to shake off.

Love in Aakashganga didn't just run in theatres—it refused to leave, like a relative who shows up "for two days" and stays for six months. Week after week, the houseful boards hung outside cinemas like permanent decorations. Some halls even stopped taking them down because what was the point? Audiences were lining up from 5 AM, bringing stools, newspapers, and in one case, a harmonium to pass time.

Saqib Ali, walking around with the confidence of a man who predicted an earthquake correctly, kept reminding people, "I told you it would break all records." And he was right. The movie was a storm. A cyclone. A cosmic tsunami of ticket sales.

Soon petitions began circulating demanding the film be sent to the Oscars. Thousands signed—students, rickshaw drivers, housewives, and one confused uncle who thought he was signing a gas connection form. But the Bangladesh Film Board politely rejected the request, saying,

"The West only likes watching poor Bangladeshis fighting over water with landlords. They are not ready for our intergalactic romance."

Saqib threw his hands up and said, "Their loss. We don't need Oscars."

Despite not so favorable reviews, the film became a cultural earthquake. Aatish Kumar shot to superstardom so fast

satellites probably detected the heat from his rise. People even compared his overnight fame to Kumar Gaurav after *Love Story.* The funniest part? Even the first word of both films was "Love."

"Divine signal," Aatish whispered, convinced destiny was fond of him.

He thanked Babloo repeatedly for forcing him to sign the movie. "If not for you," he admitted, "I would have been doing serials where my only dialogue was *'Ma, chai le aao.'*"

Magazines plastered him on their covers with headlines like "Bangladesh's Amitabh Bachchan... with an accent", which nobody defined clearly but somehow made sense.

One day Aatish received a stash of best quality Ganja..on the packet it was written, "from Disco Rafiq-With Love". Admiration in its purest form, Aatish contemplated while smoking the joint.

By week four, one thing was obvious: ***Love in Aakashganga*** wasn't just a film—it was a national fever. And Aatish? He wasn't just a star anymore.

He was the galaxy's favourite son.

As the movie marched into its fifth week like an unstoppable army of dancing Saturnians, something else began happening: offers rained on Aatish. Not rained—poured, like a monsoon on a politician's inauguration.

Every filmmaker in Bangladesh, from legends to those who shoot entire movies on rooftops with one tube-light, came knocking.

One director promised him a patriotic drama where Aatish would single-handedly defeat an invading army using only *lathi* and motivational speeches.

Another pitched a romantic thriller where Aatish would play both the hero and heroine "because audiences love you so much it's better to give them double."

But Saqib Ali had already disappeared into his creative cave, scribbling furiously like a man possessed by twelve film school ghosts. When he emerged, he announced his next project with the seriousness of a doctor revealing a rare disease:

A western.

Inspired by The Good, The Bad and The Ugly.

Also inspired by The Matrix.

Set in a dystopian, post-apocalyptic future Bangladesh.

People blinked. Some asked if he was alright. One journalist whispered, "Does he need electrolytes?"

Saqib explained passionately, waving his arms like he was conducting an orchestra of cowboys and robots. "Picture this—dusty wasteland, long coats, bullet time, harmonica, slow-motion bullet dodging, and a villain who controls the weather. It will be the MOST ambitious Bangladeshi film ever made."

Clint Eastwood... meets Keanu Reeves.

In a dystopian, post-apocalyptic Bangladesh."

The room went silent.

He continued, passionately waving imaginary revolvers:

"Aatish will wear a cowboy hat. Cigar in mouth. Squint like Eastwood. But ALSO—bullet time! Somersaults! Dodging bullets mid-air like Keanu, but with a horse running in slow motion behind him."

The editor whispered, "Does he need glucose?"

Another fainted from excitement or confusion.

Before the stunned crowd could respond, Aatish stood up like a soldier saluting a flag.

"I'm in," he said.

"But you haven't heard the script," Babloo reminded him.

Aatish shrugged. "Script, no script—if Saqib bhai can make me dance on Saturn, he can make me walk in a desert wearing black overcoats. I trust him."

And just like that, destiny began brewing its next madness. Saqib smiled.

The universe is getting ready for another big bang, the difference is that it's not happening in a distant universe but in a dark room of Dhaka.

Chapter 4

Bhaiya,Mere Rakhi Ke Bandhan Ko Nibhana

Meanwhile in Bombay Dhruv was juggling between *Rannbhoomi* and *Pyaar Hain Tumse.* Bombay was spinning faster than Dhruv Kumar could keep up. By day he was Ranga—the fiery revolutionary who could stare down a British soldier without blinking. By night he was Prem—the lover-boy who carried a guitar like it was national property and broke into songs even if a waiter simply asked, "Sir, water or soda?"

Two universes. One actor. One very confused method mind.

In *Rannbhoomi*, Dhruv strode through smoky battlefields clutching a rusted pistol. In *Pyaar Hain Tumse,* he held a pink guitar with glitter butterflies. His soul didn't know whether to shout "*Inquilab Zindabad*!" or sing *"Dil mera tumse mila re*!"

Often he did both, which terrified everyone on set.

One afternoon, after delivering a chest-thumping patriotic monologue, the assistant director rushed in yelling, "Sir, *Pyaar Hain Tumse* shift! Pack up, pack up!"

Dhruv blinked. "But I'm in freedom-fighter mode. At least give me time to transition."

"Sir, transition on the way. Car waiting downstairs."

Cut to Dhruv, still in Ranga's soot-covered costume, standing in front of a giant heart-shaped set. The heroine entered, looked at his burnt clothes and wild hair, and screamed, "Oh my God, what happened to you?"

Dhruv sighed, "Love. And also colonial oppression."

Then came the outdoor schedule.

Dhruv had imagined Europe—the Alps, the snow, the postcard romance. He even bought a new muffler for slow-motion running.

Gulshan Kumar called him to the office, put an arm around his shoulder and announced proudly,

"Outdoor shooting is fixed."

Dhruv's eyes sparkled. "Switzerland?"

"Khandala." I am not Yash Chopra,I believe in realism. At least when it comes to the budget. Also how can a struggling singer sing duets in the Alps. All he can manage is two bus tickets to Khandala.

Silence. Dhruv felt his soul leave his body, look around for the Alps, find none, and return disappointed.

The outdoor shoot for *Pyaar Hain Tumse* finally began, and Dhruv arrived expecting something classy—maybe a vintage car, a meadow picnic, a romantic track with mountains. Instead, he saw... a stationary bus parked on the side of the Khandala highway, smothered in fake marigolds and a banner proudly declaring: "Prem Family Picnic Tours—Established This Morning."

Director Jimmy yelled, "Prem! Family picnic song! Full happiness. Zero logic!"

Dhruv sighed, "Fantastic. My career memoir title."

The bus wasn't moving—mostly because it refused to. The engine had died at the very first incline, deciding it was not spiritually aligned with outdoor shoots. So now the whole cheerful-family-outing illusion had to be created with a shaking camera, a wind machine, and one overworked junior artist outside manually rotating a tyre like he was auditioning for a handpump commercial.

Prem's widowed mother sat in the front, smiling so hard she looked like she'd been promised a national award for Enthusiasm Per Frame. And Priya—the actress playing Sushma, Prem's chirpy sister—took her position by the window, ready to lip-sync to a song about family bonding while the bus remained stubbornly, triumphantly, completely still.

"Ready? ACTION!"

The music blasted.

Instantly, the trio launched into a hyperactive family song sequence. Prem strummed his guitar with the enthusiasm of a man whose life depended on every chord. Mother clapped with enough force to wake the dead. Sushma sang so confidently that even the playback singer would second-guess her job.

Inside the bus set, the mood was full Barjatya on steroids.

The actress playing mother shouted, "Beta, guitar tez bajaao!"

Dhruv whispered, "Ma'am, speaker phat jayega."

Director screamed, "GOOD! Emotions must blast!"

Then came antakshari—scripted, rehearsed, and still somehow chaotic.

Dhruv started, "M—"

Mother cut him, "No no! P se gaao! 'Prem' vibes!"

Sushma chimed in, "I'll take H! High notes only!"

Dhruv muttered, "It's antakshari, not JEE exam..."

The entire bus—junior artists pretending to be "other passengers"—joined the singing like they were held at emotional gunpoint. One man clapped off-beat with so enthusiastm that Jimmy Bottlewala shouted, "*Background mein bhi talent chahiye*!"

To simulate the bus moving, two spot boys rocked the vehicle from the outside. Another guy sprayed water for

"monsoon feel." The fourth kept slipping into frame because his job was to blow bubble soap for "happy mood," and he looked miserable doing it.

Finally, director yelled, "CUT! BEAUTIFUL!

Dhruv collapsed on the seat, exhausted.

He had played Lord Ram in Ramleela, played useless extras and even a revolutionary ... but nothing—NOTHING—prepared him for playing a man whose family sings louder than a generator and dances in a stationary bus pretending to be moving.

For a moment, he whispered to himself:

"*Rannbhoomi* needed guns.

This one need survival instincts."

And the shoot continued.

In a few months, the shoot and post-production of *Rannbhoomi* wrapped up like a war India actually won on time, and finally, the night of the grand premiere arrived. Dhruv felt like he was walking into his own wedding—nervous, sweaty, and mildly questioning his life choices.

He had called his Kanpur gang, and of course, his parents. Gita was missing , obviously. The moment they stepped onto the red carpet, the chaos began. The night of the *Rannbhoomi* premiere looked less like a film event and more like a high-profile wedding where everyone pretended they weren't judging each other's outfits. Dhruv arrived in a tux too shiny, but with

the swagger of a man who owned three. Behind him came his parents and his two Kanpur brothers-in-arms—Chotu and Mukesh—who looked like they had mistakenly walked into the United Nations.

Chotu froze at the entrance. "Is that... Jackie Shroff?"

Mukesh elbowed him. "Don't stare. In Bombay, if you stare at celebs, you automatically look poor."

Meanwhile, Dhruv's mother was scanning the whole theatre like an old rooftop TV antenna desperately trying to catch the "celebrity channel." Her head kept swivelling so dramatically she could've been hired as a lighthouse for lost actors. She was already planning to make a detailed list for her neighbours back in Kanpur—complete with rankings—so she could proudly boast, "Yes, yes, I met everyone... even someone who might have been important. Or just holding a thermos. Hard to tell."

His father, on the other hand, marched ahead with the confidence of a man who believed the entire production team owed him rent. He greeted absolutely everyone with a grand, statesman-like "Good morning, sir!"—including a cable boy, a background artist stretching near a tree, and one confused tourist who wasn't even part of the party.

At one point, he nodded at a random man in sunglasses and whispered to his wife, "That one... definitely a producer. Or a criminal. Honestly, the hairstyle works for both."Inside the auditorium, the lights dimmed. The movie began.

And then there he was—Dhruv Kumar, in full revolutionary glory, walking through smoke with a pistol in hand.

Chotu gasped. "Arre! That's OUR Dhruv!"

Mukesh whispered back, "Idiot, everyone can hear. Behave like we know celebrities every day."

Finally everyone settled down and the movie started.

Dhruv's mother was already wiping her tears by scene three, whispering prayers each time Dhruv jumped off a cliff or punched ten British soldiers at once.

His father nodded thoughtfully upon every punch. "Good stance. I taught him that. Once."

As the movie progressed,we can see a variety of emotions on all the faces.

Dhruv watched himself on the screen, half proud, half confused. Is that really me? Or some alternate version who knows slow-motion martial arts?

When the film ended, something magical happened.

A standing ovation.

Real. Loud. Honest.

Rajkumar Santoshi looked like he might float into the ceiling. Crew members clapped till their palms hurt. Big producers patted Dhruv's back as if they had always believed in him.

Chotu whispered, "Bhai... you're famous now."

Mukesh nodded. “Just don’t forget us when you become a superstar”.

Dhruv smiled, eyes shining.

Cloud nine?

He was somewhere above that—

maybe cloud ninety.

During the end credits, the applause felt like a tidal wave. Big producers clapped him on the back, senior actors shook his hand, and one critic—famous for hating everything—declared, “A star is born.” Dhruv floated through it all, dazed, thrilled, terrified... in the best way.

But once the crowd thinned and the champagne stopped circulating, he did what felt truly right: he whisked his parents and his two childhood allies—Chotu and Mukesh—straight to a five-star hotel for dinner. A celebratory treat from a newly crowned star to the people who knew him before he could afford socks without holes.

The moment they stepped inside, his friends and parents froze. The lobby alone looked like it had been designed by someone who hated poor people.

Chotu leaned in and whispered, “Why is everything shiny? Even the door handle sparkles.”

Mukesh added, “I feel like we’re trespassing.”

The menu arrived. His father held it carefully, as though it might explode. "These prices," he murmured, "are they per plate or per kilogram?"

His mother frowned. "Why is the font so small? Do rich people have great eyesight?"

Chotu, refusing to appear confused, pointed at a random item. "I'll have... this." He had no idea what "Wild Mushroom Ragout" meant but assumed anything wild must be exciting.

Dinner concluded without disaster—until the finger bowls arrived.

Small bowls of warm water with lemon slices drifted toward them like mysterious offerings.

Chotu whispered, "Is this some sort of miniature soup?"

Mukesh lifted his bowl, examining it like a scientist. "Maybe it's a new type of lemon juice," he said, preparing to squeeze the lemon.

Dhruv intervened just in time. "No! It's for washing your hands."

Mukesh embarrassingly . "Ah. Of course. Obviously."

Dhruv laughed—not at them, but in pure affection. He might have just become a star, but these people, their innocence, their wonder... that was home.

After the much appreciated premiere,the movie was released and the next day of the release Bombay woke up to a blizzard of pre- release critical reviews. Every newspaper, big or tiny,

had something to say about *Rannbhoomi*—and none of them agreed on anything.

One critic wrote, "A bold, thunderous epic. Dhruv Kumar commands the screen like a general with hair mousse."

Another sniffed, "Too loud, too dramatic, too enthusiastic. The film could defeat enemy nations, but not my patience."

A third review simply said, "Dhruv Kumar shows promise. Also shows excessive enthusiasm for shouting."

Someone else praised his eyes, someone complained about his jawline, and one brutally honest columnist declared, "He runs like he's being chased by the landlord for unpaid rent."

But whether they adored him, tolerated him, or wanted him to take voice-modulation classes, it was clear: Dhruv Kumar had arrived.

As he read everything with a grin, Dhruv silently thanked Sanjay Dutt.

Not out loud, of course—just in his head.

If Sanju Baba hadn't gone to jail, he thought, I'd still be playing 'Man With Bucket number 3' in the background.

Fate worked in mysterious ways.

Sometimes, it even worked in your favour.

The reviews were still spread out on the coffee table when Dhruv's landline rang—one of those long-bell triiiing-triiiings that always felt like a government alert.

It was Gita.

Her voice was warm, excited, trembling just a bit.

"Dhruv... we all went to see your movie yesterday. My whole family. Even Bauji. He didn't say anything... but I felt he was happy.I think they won't oppose us now. When are you coming to talk about our marriage?"

Dhruv froze.

Marriage.

That word now felt heavier than all the costumes he wore in *Rannbhoomi* combined.

Just yesterday he was just Nitin from Kanpur—standing in a five-star hotel explaining to Mukesh why the lemon water wasn't a beverage.

But today?

Today he was Dhruv Kumar. Man of the moment. The critics' darling. The revolutionary heartthrob who apparently shouted too much on screen.

Marriage meant... settling. And settling meant... female fans imagining him buying vegetables.

His stardom was barely a day old—still warm from the projector beam.

He cleared his throat.

"Gita... I'll come soon, of course. Very soon. But right now everything is happening so fast. New commitments, new

schedules... I don't want to rush something so important. We should wait a little. Just a little."

There was a long pause.

Gita, small-town, faithful, hopeful, finally said softly, "If you say so... I'll wait."

And Dhruv felt a pinch of guilt—quick, but sharp.

Because the truth was simple: he wasn't Nitin anymore.

Film sets, five-star hotels, premiere nights—this was his world now, and marriage didn't fit into the frame just yet.

The next morning, he reached the set of *Pyaar Hain Tumse,* relieved—finally—because now he didn't have to switch between "Freedom Fighter With Pistol" and "Boy With Guitar Who Falls in Love Every 10 Minutes."

A lover boy was so much simpler. Less shouting. More hair gel.

Then came the announcement.

Gulshan Kumar arrived, palms joined, eyes shining like he had personally invented tourism.

"Dhruv ji... pack your bags. Outdoor shoot is next week."

Dhruv's heart soared. "Khandala or this time a bit further?" Ooty

"No, no.But it's same. Abroad."

"Abroad-abroad?"

“Yes, abroad-abroad. Sri Lanka. Close enough. Why go to the Alps when Lanka has a discount package AND coconuts?”

Dhruv had to laugh. It wasn’t exactly the snow-capped romance he'd dreamt of—but it was still foreign soil.

And for a rising star, foreign soil meant one thing: he had officially arrived.

Somewhere far away, Gita waited.

But somewhere even closer, destiny was adjusting his mark on the set and whispering—

“Roll camera.”

The entire cast and crew including the nagging and ever demanding mother of the heroine landed in Sri Lanka with the excitement of schoolchildren on their first picnic—except half of them immediately complained about the humidity, and the other half complained that the hotel didn’t have “aloo paratha like Bombay.”

Dhruv, meanwhile, was floating. Foreign breeze, foreign ocean, foreign pigeons—everything felt like a milestone.

Priya, playing his on-screen sister Sushma, arrived with exactly one suitcase and three ambitions: act well, save money, and avoid weird uncles. She and Dhruv kept finding themselves paired in scenes—family songs, beach montages, sibling banter where Dhruv sometimes forgot he was supposed to act brotherly and accidentally looked at her like she was a sunset.

The directors didn't notice. They were too busy bribing local monkeys not to steal lights.

One evening, after wrapping a syrupy emotional scene where Prem (Dhruv) promises to protect his sister forever, Priya turned to him and said, "Since you're my brother on screen, you can buy me tea off screen."

And somehow, that became their first outing.

They walked along Galle Face Green, sipping tea so sweet it could cause diabetes on sight. The breeze was nice, the sunset dramatic, but nothing compared to the absurdity of the fact that Dhruv kept forgetting she was "family" in the movie.

"So," Priya said, "How does it feel? Big premiere, newspapers, critics calling you 'promising'?"

Dhruv shrugged. "Promising is just polite code for 'We'll see.' But it feels good. And terrifying. Mostly terrifying."

Priya laughed. "You? Terrified? You shout at the camera like it owes you money."

"Oh please," he said. "I grew up in Kanpur. Shouting is our family language."

She nodded. "Same. I'm from Indore. Our family motto was: eat, argue, repeat."

They began swapping stories—crowded childhood homes, power cuts during exams, hand-me-down clothes stitched to survive three cousins. It felt strange and comforting. Most people in Bollywood talked about their gym trainers or their

spiritual gurus. Priya talked about ration-shop queues and how the neighbor's buffalo once chased her through the gully.

Dhruv realized, mid-conversation, that he genuinely enjoyed listening. That hadn't happened in a long time.

He also realized—dangerously—that every time Priya smiled, something in his chest behaved like an overworked generator.

But he played it cool, or at least tried to.

They visited a small street market where Priya bought a cheap bracelet and insisted it was "cultural bonding." Dhruv bought a coconut, mostly to look macho, and then needed Priya's help to open it because apparently the coconut had anger issues.

They ended up sitting by the water, waves crashing dramatically—as if they too wanted close-up shots.

Priya looked at him thoughtfully. "You know... it's strange. On screen you're my brother. But off screen you're..."

She paused.

Dhruv leaned in just a little. "What?"

She smirked. "...a chaos machine with good hair."

He burst out laughing. "You make it sound like a compliment."

"It is," she said. "Mostly."

There was a comfortable silence. Not romantic, not awkward—just the kind that made Dhruv's brain whisper unhelpful things like:

She understands you.

She gets your madness.

And she looks nothing like your sister, so stop acting like this is illegal.

He pushed the thoughts away. Or tried to. They came back like aggressive mosquitoes.

Later, when they walked back to the hotel, Priya said, "Thanks for the tea, brother."

Dhruv almost tripped.

The word hit him like a slap delivered by destiny's sarcastic hand.

Brother.

Right.

On screen.

Only on screen.

But as he watched her walk ahead, laughing with the crew, Dhruv knew one thing was certain:

This trip to Sri Lanka was about to get far more complicated than any song sequence Saroj Khan ever choreographed.

The growing closeness between Dhruv and Priya began like a bad cold: subtle, easy to ignore, and then suddenly impossible to hide.

On set in Sri Lanka, they kept exchanging glances that had no business existing between an on-screen brother and sister. During song takes, whenever the camera panned past them, their eyes met like two teenagers who had discovered hormones for the first time.

Priya would laugh at Dhruv's jokes a little too loudly.

Dhruv would look at Priya a little too long.

The crew wasn't blind. Gaffers would nudge each other. Makeup artists whispered conspiratorially. Even the assistant choreographer—who was barely conscious most days—noticed something "vibrational."

Both Dhruv and Priya felt a connection as they shared a few things in common. Coming from small cities and daring to dream big. Unlike the nepobaby heroine with whom Dhruv shared nothing in common barring the scenes together and in Priya,Dhruv felt a strange sense of serenity reminding him of his innocent self he left far behind in Kanpur.

But the person most distressed by this growing electricity was Raju, Dhruv's eternally stressed, prematurely balding manager.

One afternoon, while Dhruv rehearsed a scene where he had to emote brotherly affection, Raju dragged him aside.

Raju whispered dramatically, Dhruv..oh sorry sir.. whatever ... something fishy is happening."

Dhruv pretended to be confused. "Fishy? What fishy?"

Raju looked at him like a parent who has seen the search history.

"Don't act innocent. You and Priya... there's... atmosphere."

"There's no atmosphere," Dhruv said, waving it off. "We're just friends."

Raju snorted. "Ah yes. The sacred Bollywood phrase. Sir, whenever an actor says 'just friends,' I immediately prepare a press statement and a lawyer."

Dhruv rolled his eyes. "You're overthinking."

Raju jabbed a finger at him. "And you are underthinking. She is your on-screen sister. Do you know what this means? If Gulshan Kumar finds out he will chain you to a harmonium and make you sing bhajans for the rest of your life!"

Dhruv shooed him away. "Relax. Nothing is happening."

Raju muttered, "That's what all heroes say... right before everything happens."

After a long day of shooting a beach sequence (where even the waves looked tired), the cast and crew gathered for drinks near the poolside. Sri Lankan beer flowed, someone found a guitar, someone else attempted to sing, and someone threw up into a flowerpot shaped like an elephant.At some point, the group thinned out and slowly everyone went to sleep in their

respective rooms after getting drunk. The weather was getting cold and Dhruv invited Priya to his room, Priya shyly nodded.

Inside the room, Priya sat next to Dhruv, her shoulder brushing his now and then, each accidental touch feeling less accidental than the previous one.

They talked, they laughed, they flirted in ways that would make Suraj Barjatya faint.

The night breeze grew colder, the sounds of the sea louder, and the room was cozy. And Dhruv and Priya were still sitting, leaning closer and closer, like gravity had taken a personal interest. Dhruv looked at her eyes and said, "You have beautiful eyes".

Priya said softly, "You're drunk."

Dhruv said, "Maybe. But I'm also... honest."

Priya looked at him with a seriousness she had never used before. "And what is your honest thought?"

"That I shouldn't feel this way," Dhruv whispered. "But I do."

Her breath caught — not dramatically like in films, but in a small, involuntary way that made reality feel far more dangerous than cinema.

The rest of what happened is something even Dhruv's overactive imagination couldn't have scripted.

There was a moment of hesitation, a shared look that held both fear and longing — and then the world blurred into a

tangle of impulse, warmth, desire, and a decision they could never unmake.

He caught her hand, pressing it against his lips, then pulled her close until their eyes locked—his burning with devotion, hers glowing with the fire of unquenched passion.

Her fingers traced his cheek, and in that touch he felt a command stronger than the call of battle. He claimed her mouth with his, first tender, then desperate, their lips fusing with the force of years of longing. Her taste was richer than the finest beer he ever tasted, her kiss more intoxicating than anything he experienced before.

His hands roamed across her back, drawing shivers that betrayed her anticipation. She leaned her head back exposing her beautiful neck to him, and Dhruv answered with slow, deliberate kisses that deepened until she gasped—her skin carrying the fragrance of roses just opening at dawn.

Her gown slid down her shoulders in a silken fall, baring skin so soft his hands trembled as they explored her, tracing every curve, every secret hollow. Priya clung to him, her fingers spreading across his chest, feeling the warmth of his body made vulnerable only for her. His mouth found her collarbone, her breasts, each kiss igniting a new fire, until she arched against him, inviting more, craving more.

In that moment they were not the characters they were playing on screen—only the primitive feelings of their bodies.

The cool night breeze swept in, teasing bare skin, heightening every sensation.

They moved together with a hunger both savage and tender, surrendering to the pull between them as though rediscovering a language their bodies had always known—the oldest, most primal language of love.

Finally both reached the zenith of love, laying in each other's arms, their eyes looking at each other where they found only love and nothing else. With a smile, Priya expressed how good she felt after the intense love and Dhruv reciprocated showing these are the moments for which life is worth living for.

Embraced in each other's arms, they barred not only their bodies but souls to each other. The moonlight from the windows was a testament to the love they had for each other. At this moment, everything else ceased to exist except them.

The room was steeped in sweet silence after the passionate love they made, the dim lights of the room were flickering their shadows on the wall. Priya was fondling his chest while he was caressing her free-flowing hair and the warmth of their bodies mingling with each other.

Dhruv woke up to sunlight stabbing through the curtains like judgement. Priya was beside him, looking equally guilty and mortified.

For a full ten seconds they just stared at each other, silently screaming inside.

Priya finally spoke, "Last night... was..."

Dhruv finished, “Something beautiful?”

She nodded. “Yes. No. I don’t know. I want breakfast.”

Dhruv laughed despite everything. “That’s a good sign.”

But as they sat on opposite edges of the bed, neither could deny the truth hanging between them: something real had sparked.

Not infatuation.

Not drunken foolishness.

Something deeper. Something that had been building quietly from the moment they shared tea on Galle Face.

Priya sighed. “This is going to complicate everything, isn’t it?”

Dhruv rubbed his face. “Oh absolutely. This is the exact opposite of simple.”

AND THEN… IT GREW

Trying to hide their growing relationship was like trying to hide a firework inside a library.

On set, they avoided eye contact — which only made the crew more suspicious.

During breaks, they’d wander off together under the pretext of “rehearsing lines.”

Makeup artists rolled their eyes.

Spot boys smirked.

The director once yelled, “WHERE ARE MY TWO SIBLINGS?!”

The irony killed everyone.

Even Raju noticed.

He cornered Dhruv again. “Sir, what did I tell you? There is fish. A whole aquarium.”

Dhruv snapped, “Raju, calm down. We’re figuring it out.”

Raju gasped as if stabbed. “FIGURING?! Sir, that is the worst word in the English language! Only disasters begin with figuring!”

Meanwhile, Gulshan Kumar—still in Bombay—had absolutely no clue.

He was busy managing cassettes, bhajans, business empires, and politely declining extortion calls.

Back in Sri Lanka, Dhruv and Priya continued dancing between secrecy and attraction. Their chemistry began showing up on camera too—so much that the director said, “This brother-sister bond... feels suspiciously incestious”

Dhruv coughed. Priya looked away. Raju facepalmed.

But the truth was undeniable:

They were no longer two struggling actors sharing a similar past.

They were two people stumbling into something tender, risky, magnetic — and completely out of control.

Sri Lanka had changed everything.

And neither had any idea what storm waited for them once they returned to Bombay.

The Sri Lanka schedule was over in a few days and the moment the Sri Lanka flight landed in Bombay, reality hit Dhruv like airport humidity: heavy, unavoidable, and slightly suffocating.

Priya gave him a polite, friendly nod near baggage claim — the kind of nod siblings in commercials give each other.

Dhruv mirrored it.

Raju watched them both with the suspicion of a customs officer who just knows someone is smuggling gold in their socks.

Back in the studio, shooting resumed for *Pyaar Hain Tumse,* and at first, it seemed like Dhruv and Priya would pull this off. They behaved… professional. Civil. Respectful.

Too much so.

It was the kind of politeness that screamed we did something we're hiding.

The crew felt it.

Somewhere, the gaffer whispered, "Their brother–sister energy suddenly feels… allergic."

The makeup girl said, "They don't fight, they don't laugh — they just stay away. This is fishy."

The choreographer nodded gravely, "This is beyond fishy. This is prawn-cargo-level suspicious."

Slowly, gossip began to slither through the industry's grapevine — the most efficient network in the early 90s after Mumbai's BEST buses.

Bollywood in the 90s had five fastest things:

Govinda changing outfits

Sunny Deol Shouting

Mithun signing movies

Shahrukh Khan stealing others' girlfriends

And rumours spreading without proof, logic, or brakes

By the end of the week, the whispers had evolved into a full-scale circus:

"Did you hear? Dhruv and Priya grew close in Lanka."

"How close?" Rumours in Bollywood spread faster than a jungle fire.

"Secret film? Someone told me she's pregnant."

"Pregnant?! But she plays his sister!"

"Exactly! What a twist!"

By the time these rumours reached the ears of small-time reporters, the story had mutated into something that would make even tabloids vomit.

Dhruv didn't know whether to laugh or hide in a cupboard.

One evening, as he walked into the studio, a random assistant director winked and whispered, "Brother-sister bonding — eh, hero?"

Another said, "Sir, great method acting! Real immersion!"

Raju kept panicking. "Sir, they think you're doing THIS MUCH method acting. Even Marlon Brando would resign!"

Priya handled it better but was clearly rattled. Every time someone mentioned "chemistry," she nearly tripped over a prop.

Meanwhile, producer supreme Gulshan Kumar remained blissfully unaware.

He was too busy releasing cassettes, shooting ten devotional videos simultaneously, and overseeing the music of his magnum opus *Pyaar Hain Tumse* unaware of the real *pyaar* that happened in Sri Lanka.

Somebody (from the sets probably) leaked the news of the affair between Dhruva nd Priya and in Bollywood gossip travels like smoke — it reaches everywhere, even in closed rooms.

Within a week, Bombay's magazines pounced like vultures spotting a mildly confused goat. Every stall from Bandra to Borivali displayed the same scandal splashed across their glossy covers: "Brotherly Love… Upgraded!" another screamed "When Reel Siblings Stop Following the Script!" while one

particularly enthusiastic tabloid went with "Incest Is In! Dhruv & Priya Lead the Trend!"

Columnists, starved for excitement ever since a veteran actor quit smoking, treated the affair like a national emergency. Coffee shops buzzed, studios whispered, and assistants sprinted around carrying magazines as if distributing evidence of a crime. The running joke everywhere was: "If this is their chemistry as siblings, imagine if they were cast as lovers!"

Producers snickered. Directors sighed. Junior artists pretended to faint in moral outrage. And Bollywood, which had survived affairs, divorces, and three simultaneous Mithun Chakraborty releases, now had its juiciest gossip in years—an "incestuous" romance that wasn't incest at all, but delicious enough to pretend it was.

And eventually... it reached Gulshan Kumar

One day during a mixing session, a composer casually said:

"Sir... is it true your hero and his on-screen sister have become... very friendly?"

Gulshan Kumar almost fell from his chair!

"Friendly? How friendly?"

"You know... Sri Lanka friendly."

Gulshan narrowed his eyes.

"Nobody becomes friendly in Sri Lanka unless something is fishy."

The assistant added helpfully, “Sir, they say chemistry was… increasing.”

Gulshan snapped, “CHEMISTRY? In a brother-sister track? Tell them to decrease it immediately!”

By the end of the day, Gulshan Kumar had heard 12 different versions:

“They are dating.”

“They are engaged.”

“They are secretly married.”

“They kissed during a song rehearsal.”

“They eloped to Colombo.”

“They have matching tattoos.”Rumours intensified.

Scenes became harder to shoot.

Every time Dhruv said “Sushma, my dear sister during scenes,” he felt like the universe was laughing at him.

And through all of this, Dhruv faced a truth he couldn’t escape

“I will handle this personally. This is getting more dramatic than my movies.” Gulshan Kumar declared.

Gulshan Kumar summoned Dhruv to his office the way a king summons a court jester who has accidentally burned down half the kingdom and this time he meant business. A peon opened the door with the reverence of someone unveiling

a public hanging. Dhruv stepped in as if walking toward his own autopsy table.

The next morning on set, Dhruv walked in with Raju, mentally preparing for a normal day. He had barely sat in the makeup chair when an assistant whispered:

"*Sir... producer saab aa gaye.*"

Dhruv froze.

Priya froze two rooms away.

Raju began sweating aggressively.

Gulshan entered the set with the quiet intensity of a man who has seen too many rumors and not enough truth. He then called Priya also to his chamber.

He inspected cameras... lights... actors... then marched straight to Dhruv.

Dhruv stood up like a schoolboy caught cheating.

Gulshan said calmly, "I heard... stories."

Dhruv's heart dropped.

Gulshan leaned in, voice low, "In my film... the brother and sister are behaving too awkward. This is bad for business."

Gulshan sat behind his massive desk—equal parts throne, altar, and execution platform—reading magazines with headlines that screamed things like "Brotherhood to Loverhood?", "Rakhi or Romance?", and "Siblings Not By Blood... Thankfully."

The maestro of cassettes looked up, his glasses sliding to the tip of his nose. "Sit," he said, in the tone of a firing squad commander offering last rites.

Dhruv sat.

Gulshan held up a magazine like evidence in court. "Explain this. Explain THIS!" he thundered. "Affair? Fine. Heroine? Fine. Even a chorus dancer—FINE! But you... you... you picked your ON-SCREEN SISTER?! Do you understand what you've done?"

Dhruv opened his mouth. Nothing came out except air and mild regret.

Gulshan continued, rising from his chair with dramatic gravitas. "This movie is a FAMILY DRAMA. Families! The people who watch this kind of film don't even let their children hold hands after age twelve! And you—Bollywood's new rising star—are being accused of sharing hotel shampoo bottles with the girl playing your sibling!"

He paced like a judge deciding whether to sentence the accused to life or just bad television roles.

"If you HAD to have an affair," Gulshan said, stabbing a finger in the air, "why not the heroine? At least I'd get publicity! Free PR! Headlines like 'Hero-Heroine Caught in Secret Love!' but this INCEST? INCEST MARKETING? What am I supposed to do with that?!"

Dhruv attempted a weak smile. It evaporated instantly under Gulshan's glare.

"And how," Gulshan leaned closer, "how do you expect a mother in Gorakhpur to accept you two as siblings on screen when the morning newspaper says you were spotted feeding each other pudding at midnight?"

Silence.

Dead, awkward, funereal silence.

Gulshan finally delivered the sentence: "I am HALTING the film. INDEFINITELY. No release. No shooting. No posters. Nothing. Call it a creative crisis, financial issue—call it god's will. But it stops TODAY."

Dhruv felt the floor vanish under him. His rising career—barely a few films old—suddenly looked like it was being cremated without rituals.

Gulshan added, with chilling calmness, "And pray that when I restart it, audiences haven't already turned you into a cautionary tale."

Dhruv left, feeling like a condemned man walking out of court, free but already dead inside.

By evening, the news reached Kanpur like a speeding telegram on a mission to destroy lives. Gita, whose innocence could be bottled and sold as an antidote to cynicism, called Dhruv immediately.

"Nitin... this is nonsense, right?" she asked, voice trembling but hopeful. "People make stories. You know how they are."

Dhruv closed his eyes. "Gita... listen—"

"Swear," she said softly. "Swear on me."

His throat locked. No sound came.

In that silence—heavy, suffocating, unforgiving—Gita finally understood everything.

When she spoke again, her voice was breaking, but strangely steady. "Do you remember," she said, "before you left for Bombay... I told you I can accept anything from you. Failure, struggle, no money, no fame—anything. But not cheating."

Dhruv swallowed. "Gita, I... I made a mistake. I'm sorry. Please—"

"Would you accept me," she interrupted, "if I had done the same while you were away?"

The question sliced through him. He couldn't answer. Truth is rarely kind.

His silence again told her more than any explanation.

"You've changed, Nitin,in fact you are not even Nitin I knew, you are some bollywood actor called Dhruv who is no different from other bollywood actors," she whispered. "Or maybe I was foolish to believe you wouldn't change" Her breath hitched. "You're not the boy who left Kanpur. You're... someone else now. Someone I don't know."

"Gita, please—"

The phone clicked.

She was gone.

No drama. No curses. No grand declarations. Just a quiet hang-up—the kind that ends worlds.

Dhruv stared at the receiver like it had personally stabbed him.

The next few days in Bombay were a delirious haze of gossip, whispers, and journalists swarming like mosquitoes in monsoon. Every paan shop, every studio corridor, every hairdresser's cubicle hummed with speculation.

Some said Dhruv had ruined his own career.

Some said Priya had bewitched him.

Some said it was all a PR stunt gone wrong.

Some said Gulshan Kumar was planning to replace Dhruv with a safer, less romantic sibling.

Meanwhile, Dhruv roamed the city like a ghost. His guilt gnawed like a hungry dog. His phone stayed silent—no calls from Gita, none from Priya, and only the occasional abusive message from someone claiming to be "India's protector of family values."

Raju, his manager, tried cheering him up. "Don't worry, boss. People forget scandals. Remember that actor who—?"

"Not helping," Dhruv muttered.

The worst part wasn't the headlines. It wasn't Gulshan Kumar's fury. It wasn't even the halted film.

It was the echo of Gita's question—Would you accept me if I did the same?—looping in his mind like a curse.

Dhruv knew the answer.

And that was the problem.

A week later, Gulshan issued an official statement:

"Due to unforeseen moral turbulence among the cast, the film *Pyaar Hain Tumse* is temporarily suspended."

"Moral turbulence." Bombay laughed for days. The phrase became a running joke. One producer said he wanted to put it on T-shirts.

But behind the jokes was a real fear: Gulshan Kumar wasn't known for mercy. If he was angry, he could bury careers deeper than unsold audio cassettes.

Dhruv felt the walls closing in.

Whenever Dhruv stepped out, people treated him strangely.

Spot boys whispered, "There goes the brother who loved too much."

An assistant director asked innocently, "Sir, for your next role should we cast the heroine or someone from the family tree?"

One journalist, chasing him on a scooter, shouted, "Sir! Sir! Quick question—method acting or madness?!"

Bombay can be cruel.

But Bombay can also be hilarious while being cruel.

And Dhruv was experiencing both simultaneously.

Rumor mills eventually declared him a "symbol of modern forbidden romance", which was ironic because he didn't even like the term "modern."

Gulshan Kumar publicly sighed in an interview, "If only he had run off with the heroine... at least I'd have songs to sell."

Producers joked: "We can't cast Dhruv as a brother anymore. The audience won't focus on the Rakhi scene."

And in the middle of all this chaos—Dhruv quietly broke.

Not dramatically.

Not loudly.

Just internally—like a mirror cracking behind a wall.

He had fame.

He had scandals.

But he had lost the one person who saw him before he became "Dhruv Kumar, rising star."

And the worst part?

He didn't know if anything left in him was worth salvaging.

The city moved on.

The gossip didn't stop.

And Dhruv discovered the most macabre truth of all:

Bombay loves a tragedy... especially when the hero is still alive to watch it.

Dhruv's life didn't just fall apart—it collapsed like a badly built film set during monsoon, one prop after another toppling until all that remained was dust, regret, and a man trying to remember when everything last made sense.

Just a week ago, he had walked out of the *Rannbhoomi* premiere glowing like a newly polished trophy—critics praising him, directors circling him, fans screaming his name. The future felt like a bright, uninterrupted sunrise.

Now it felt like a total solar eclipse.

He had lost a major film.

He had lost his public image.

And worst of all—he had lost the only person who loved him before he learned how to pretend on camera.

It was almost funny.

Not ha-ha funny.

More like Charlie Chaplin discovering Bollywood funny.

While Dhruv wandered between studio offices hoping nobody would recognize him, Priya's life exploded in the opposite direction.

She had been just another television face—someone audiences politely tolerated between toothpaste ads. But after the scandal? She couldn't even step out to buy shampoo without a flock of photographers clicking as if they'd discovered a rare jungle animal.

The paparazzi loved her.

Producers loved her more.

Within days she had two film offers:

— One as a vamp in a thriller

— One as a second lead in a romance

Both roles she would've sold a kidney for six months ago.

Dhruv called Priya to meet him at a restaurant, hoping for some shared misery, some flicker of "we're sinking in the same boat."

What he got instead was a reminder that in Bollywood, no two people ever drown at the same time.

Priya arrived wearing sunglasses the size of dessert plates and the confidence of someone who'd finally cracked the cheat codes to survival.

"Crazy week, right?" she chirped, like they weren't living two completely different realities.

Dhruv stared at her with eyes scraped hollow. "I lost my film. Gita left me. Studios won't even let me audition. The industry calls me Poison now."

She didn't even blink. "Well," she said, "that's the business."

"Business?" Dhruv repeated. "Priya... we—"

"Dhruv," she cut in, calm, precise, almost surgical. "I came from nothing. A rented room

with a landlady who charged me extra for every additional hour of fan use. My close-ups were usually someone else's shoulder.

And now—finally—I have two films. One of them with a big item number. My first real shot."

There was no cruelty in her smile. That made it worse.

"What did you expect?" she asked. "That I'd throw all that away for... feelings?"

Then she let the truth spill like acid—raw, corrosive, and long overdue.

"I did theatre for five years," she said, each word heavy, scraped. "Five years of sweating under burning lights, learning craft from people who lived and died for it. I learned method, movement, breath control, timing—everything real actors torture themselves to perfect. And after all that? What did I get?

A few Doordarshan serials buried in afternoon slots, two toothpaste ads where my entire existence was reduced to thirty seconds of smiling like a human enamel chart."

Her eyes hardened.

"And while I was doing that? Some clueless nepobaby who can't even find the camera lens gets a megastar launch, a PR team, a stylist, and a destiny carved out of someone else's money and privilege."

She inhaled, shaky, furious.

"And when a film finally called me—finally noticed I existed—do you know what they offered?"

She let out a sound that was supposed to be a laugh but came out like a cracked scream.

She laughed, a sound with no humour in it.

"The sister. The hero's damn sister. After years of starving, waiting, praying... my 'big break' was standing behind the lead pair like a decorative lamp, nodding fondly while they romanced to slow-motion violins. That was the grand role the industry felt I deserved. That was the summit I was expected to be grateful for."

Her voice dropped to a whisper sharp enough to cut glass.

"This place doesn't reward talent, Dhruv. It rewards convenience."

She shook her head, the anger ice-cold now.

"Tell me, Dhruv... how long am I supposed to keep pretending that's enough?

So no—I'm done playing grateful. I deserve more than scraps."

Dhruv felt the words hit him like blows—slow, deliberate, inescapable.

For a moment, the restaurant noise faded. The clinking cutlery, the murmuring tables, even Priya's breathing—everything dissolved into a dull, suffocating hum.

He had expected anger. Maybe tears. Maybe a shared moment of collapse.

What he got instead was reality—unfiltered, unapologetic, and aimed straight at him.

He stared at her, not blinking, not breathing, feeling something inside him buckle.

"So that's it?" he finally whispered. His voice sounded foreign, like it belonged to someone already halfway broken. "*Everything we were... it meant nothing?"*

Priya didn't flinch.

"*That's not what I said,*" she replied. "I'm saying it means less than survival."

The words sliced straight through him.

Dhruv felt his chest tighten—not with outrage, but with an unbearable clarity.

He saw it all at once: the months of auditions, the humiliations, the rejections, the waiting rooms filled with men who looked like slightly better versions of him... all the hopes he had stapled together with sheer will.

And Priya—sipping coffee like nothing happened.

He swallowed, his throat dry as dust.

"Just tell me one thing," he said quietly. "Was it you who leaked the news of our affair to the media?"

Priya didn't answer with words.

She didn't need to.

The small, sharp, sarcastic smile on her lips was an admission, a verdict, and a goodbye.

Dhruv felt something inside him tear—not loudly, not dramatically, but in the quiet, definite way a rope snaps when it's been stretched too long.

She stood up.

He didn't.

She walked out with the ease of someone stepping into a future that finally opened its doors to her.

Dhruv sat there, staring at the empty chair across from him, feeling the pieces of himself scatter like broken glass on a tiled floor.

In that moment he understood a truth no one tells you—

Bollywood isn't heaven or hell. It's a machine that grinds the weak and spits out the forgettable.

Survival of the fittest isn't a phrase here.

It's the entry rule.

And Dhruv realized—felt it crack through his chest like a rib snapping—that he'd just been taught the jungle law in its most unfiltered, merciless form.

In this industry, only the predators rise.

The rest? They're carcasses on the trail—useful only as stepping stones for the ones with sharper teeth.

No one pauses.

No one looks back.

No one even pretends to care who got trampled on the way up.

That's when the final truth didn't just hit him—

it mauled him.

In Bollywood, *survival of the fittest* isn't a poetic metaphor thrown around in interviews.

It's the rule carved into the bark of this forest of lights and lies.

The jungle doesn't negotiate.

The jungle doesn't apologize.

And Dhruv had just learned its rules the only way it teaches them—brutally.

Chapter 5:

The Last Audition

News in the subcontinent travels in strange ways—sometimes through newspapers, sometimes through radio... and sometimes through a chatty Bangladeshi barber who reads every gossip magazine he can find.

So naturally, Dhruv's scandal had already crossed the border and hit Dhaka like a cyclone of masala.

Babloo stormed into Aatish's rented room, panting like he had just outrun a bus.

"Aatish bhai! News! Breaking! Explosive!"

Aatish, lounging on his bed in a lungi and a pair of sunglasses he believed made him look like a rock legend, didn't look impressed.

"If it's about the landlord's missing rice cooker," he said, "tell him I wasn't even home."

"No, bhai," Babloo said, collapsing dramatically, "your friend Dhruv Kumar... finished!"

Aatish finally sat up. "Finished? What happened? Did he sign a movie with animals?"

"Worse," Babloo whispered. "He fell in love with his on-screen sister."

Aatish froze. Then a wide grin spread across his face like he had just heard God confirm that He did take bribes.

"So the forbidden sibling romance actually happened?"

"Yes!" Babloo said. "Magazines are calling it the greatest scandal since that actor ran away with his own producer's wife in 1945. And Gulshan Kumar has stopped the film. They're hunting for a replacement hero. Reliable sources. Very reliable."

Aatish stood up so fast his sunglasses launched off his face.

"This is destiny, Babloo. Destiny wearing a shiny jacket and calling my name!"

Two days later, Aatish flew to Bombay—wearing an outfit so loud even crows stared: a bright orange blazer, green pants, and shoes polished like they were sponsored by the sun.

Now began the real war: trying to meet Gulshan Kumar—a man more elusive than a straight answer in a Bollywood interview.

Aatish Kapoor spent an entire week attempting—and failing spectacularly—to get a meeting.

He started politely. Very politely. He called Gulshan's manager.

"Sir, I just need five minutes," he said.

The manager replied with the warmth of a fridge that had just died:

"Five minutes is exactly what he doesn't have. Try... never again."

That should've discouraged any normal human being.

Aatish, however, was fueled by delusion, caffeine, and optimism therapists file under "please intervene."

He escalated.

He camped outside T-Series like a stray dog with a headshot, rehearsing greetings, smiles, and even a slow-motion hair flip—just in case Gulshan arrived in cinematic grandeur.

Security was unimpressed.

One day, while "casually leaning" on the office gate, he accidentally pressed the doorbell twenty-six times. The receptionist called security: "There's a man outside who appears... to be broken."

Another day, he tried the "coincidental walk-by" tactic—strolling past repeatedly, hoping destiny (or Gulshan) would notice him.

Instead, an office assistant stopped him and asked, “Sir... is this some kind of fitness challenge?”

He even wrote letters to Gulshan Kumar, though they never reached him,instead they were in the dustbin of T.Series office.

Through it all, Aatish never gave up—not because he was brave, but because acting was all he had. His entire identity. Good, bad, or utterly embarrassing, he was willing to fail spectacularly for a half-chance at success.

By the end of the week, a brutal truth hit him like a poorly directed slap scene: he could camp outside the building for months. Gulshan Kumar would still not notice him.

All he needed was one shot.

One perfect moment.

Aatish had tried everything short of hiding inside a courier sack and being delivered into the office.

Still no meeting.

But his optimism didn’t die.

It simply mutated into that rare Bollywood condition—

Delusional Confidence Syndrome (DCS), a disease found only in strugglers.

He told Babloo over smoking joints,

“Don’t worry. This is how legends rise. First security learns your name. Then destiny opens a door.”

Babloo sighed. “Or a jail cell.”

But Aatish didn't care.

Because for the first time in years, he felt he was inches away from fate.

Or maybe it was just the security guard.

And little did he know, that moment was about to arrive—complete with gunmen, chaos, and a miracle that made survival look like an optional subplot.

The next morning, Gulshan Kumar was already drowning in stress—magazines screaming "Sisterly Love Gone Wrong," investors calling every hour, and Dhruv crying on the phone like a malfunctioning water pump.

So when the phone rang again, he snapped,

"If this is another journalist asking whether I run a family-friendly studio, I'm hanging myself with a cassette tape!"

A calm voice replied, "Gulshan saab. We are calling from Abu Salem bhai's office."

Gulshan froze. "Ah. Of course. My day was missing only this."

"Bhai is offering you protection," the man continued. "Only a small monthly fee. Consider it... spiritual insurance."

Gulshan snorted. "I already pay insurance to the only person who matters."

"Which person?" the caller asked politely.

“God!”

A pause.

A very long, confused pause.

“God?” the henchman repeated, as if verifying a strange restaurant order.

“Yes,” Gulshan barked. “He handles my protection. Free of charge.”

The henchman covered the phone and whispered to someone behind him:

“Bhai... he says his security is outsourced to God.”

A muffled response: “Which company is that?”

“Not a company, bhai. One actual God.”

There was another pause—this one dripping with offense.

Abu Salem grabbed the receiver.

“Gulshan saab,” he said with a voice so calm it was scarier than shouting, “did you just reject me and choose... God?”

“Yes,” Gulshan said proudly. “His service is reliable.”

“Reliable?” Salem echoed. “Let me show you how unreliable God becomes when I get annoyed.”

“Are you threatening me?” Gulshan snapped.

“No, no,” Salem said, sugar-sweet.

“Threatening is rude. I’m simply... I'm planning a tutorial.”

"A tutorial?"

"Yes. A lesson. A demonstration. Something that will echo from Bombay to Bihar. Something that will remind Bollywood that you don't hang up on Abu Salem."

Gulshan gulped.

Salem continued,

"Don't worry. It'll be quick. And cinematic. After all... we respect the industry."

The line clicked.

Getting threatening ransom calls in Bollywood was hardly news, so Gulshan Kumar shrugged off Abu Salem casually—he had bigger headaches. Searching for a new hero for his movie after the incestious affair on his movie sets.

On the other hand, Gulshan Kumar became the newest item on Abu Salem's to-do list—right between "collect smuggling payment" and "buy new sunglasses."

In a dimly lit room smelling faintly of cheap cologne and stale cigarettes, Abu Salem's men huddled over a crumpled sheet of paper. One chewed the end of his pen like a nervous beaver.

"Listen," the toothpick-thin man said, "if Gulshan doesn't pay, we can't just... ring his bell. Too ordinary."

"Ordinary?" said the bulky one, cracking his knuckles. "This is Bollywood. We need drama,something cinematic."

The thin man nodded, eyes glinting. "Picture this: lights, chaos, fear... maybe even a small explosion. Nothing permanent, just a spectacle. People will talk. We shall make him an example for others,never ignore the *Bhai* of Bombay and his calls."

"Right," said the bulky one, grinning. "Make him the cautionary tale. And not just him—the whole industry will tremble. Every producer, every actor, every poor rickshaw puller who dreams of hitting the screen."

They laughed, low and conspiratorial, like villains in a 80s gangster film.

Meanwhile, in his office, Gulshan Kumar was blissfully unaware, humming a bhajan, totally unprepared for the storm about to descend. Somewhere in Bombay, shadows lengthened, and the underworld's version of a movie director was about to roll the cameras on the most chaotic, darkly comic "lesson" Bollywood had ever seen.

The city itself seemed to pause, as if waiting for the opening credits.

Abu Salem's office smelled like cheap cigars and ambition. His men were brainstorming ways to off Gulshan Kumar.

"Throw a banana peel on his path!" suggested one, grinning like a cartoon villain.

"Banana peel?" scoffed another. "We're not making slapstick! How about releasing a swarm of bees in his office?"

“Bees! Brilliant!” said the first, snapping his fingers. “Imagine the headlines: Bollywood mogul stung to death by nature’s fury!”

Abu Salem rubbed his temples, unimpressed. “Stop. Just stop. You two are idiots. We need precision.”

One man ventured, “What if... a giant cake? Poisoned, obviously. He loves sweets.”Abu Salem massaged his temples, despairing over his henchmen's IQ.

“Cake!” he groaned. “Are we killing him with cholesterol? Listen. Every Tuesday, the fool goes to the Shiv Temple. Zero security, distracted crowds. That’s our window. We make a bloody example of him and remind Bollywood who’s boss.”

To Salem, it was pure mafia dominance. To the universe, it was pitch-black comedy.

There was grim irony in hunting Gulshan Kumar—who made millions selling recorded prayers—on God's doorstep. Salem was orchestrating a bloody morning execution, completely blind to the morbid joke of sending the Cassette King straight to Lord Shiva.

Meanwhile, in his apartment, Aatish Kapoor was pacing, frustrated. Babloo had tried everything—calling, sending messages, even attempting to crash Gulshan Kumar’s office—but no luck.

“Every Tuesday,” Babloo said suddenly, as if he’d just discovered gravity, “Gulshan Kumar goes to the Shiv Temple. Minimal security. Best time to meet him.”

Aatish’s eyes lit up. “You mean… just bump into him in the temple?”

Babloo shrugged. “Yes,he is not the sole person who go to temples of tuesdays…coincidence happens, what if ours is a planned coincidence”

And just like that, destiny—or chaos—was set. Tuesday was fixed, simultaneously. Abu Salem’s men would strike. Aatish Kapoor would plead. One side wanted blood; the other wanted a Bollywood break.

The city of Bombay, oblivious to the cosmic comedy unfolding, carried on honking, sweating, and dreaming.

Tuesday couldn’t come soon enough.

Tuesday had never been an important day for Abu Salem—until he decided it was perfect for killing Gulshan Kumar.

“Routine kills people,” he declared to his men, sipping tea like a philosopher of murder. “And Gulshan’s Tuesday temple routine? That’s God-given efficiency.”

So he sent his top two shooters: Rashid, a grumpy veteran whose joints cracked louder than his gunshots, and Rauf, a rookie who still thought silencers literally made bullets whisper.

They reached the temple early—Rashid munching peanuts, Rauf nervously practicing his "steady hands" breathing like a yoga instructor with asthma.

The black Fiat sat outside the temple like a bored gangster on surveillance duty. Inside, Rashid smacked the bonnet with disgust.

"Damn those pigeons," he muttered. "They always poop on cars. Never miss. Like tiny feathery snipers."

Rauf leaned forward, studying the white splatter like it was a crime scene. "You ever notice it's only pigeons? Never crows. Never eagles. Never those fancy parrots. Just pigeons. Ever wondered why?"

Rashid huffed. "Because pigeons are idiots. But crows? Crows have personality. They're the tall, dark, handsome version of birds. They don't poop in public. They have decorum. They got class."

Rauf squinted. "Class? They eat garbage."

"Refined garbage," Rashid corrected. "And they're smart—remember faces, plan revenge, hold grudges. You wrong a crow today, he'll send a memo to his whole family tree."

"So crows are basically the mafia of birds," Rauf said, impressed.

"Exactly. They run the sky syndicate. Meanwhile pigeons..." Rashid looked at the hood again. "They're the street kids with no discipline."

Rauf nodded. “Have you ever heard of crow meat? No. But pigeon meat? In many places it's a delicacy.”

“That’s because humans judge like idiots,” Rashid said. “‘Oh look, cute little pigeon, must taste like chicken’s stylish cousin.’ One guy kills it, cooks it, finds out it’s tasty—next thing you know, pigeons are on menus.”

“So pigeons are punished for being cute?” Rauf asked.

“Basically. Same reason cute people get asked for photographs and ugly people get asked for directions.”

Rauf sighed deeply, as if contemplating the cosmic injustice of it all. “Life is cruel, man. If I were a bird, I’d rather be a crow.”

Rashid shook his head. “No chance. You’d still end up as a pigeon.”

“Why?”

“Because you talk too much and panic easily. Classic pigeon behavior.”

Rauf scowled. “At least I don’t moisturize like you.”

“It’s called skincare, you caveman.”Rauf sighed.

“All this talk about food is making me hungry.”

He reached into the glove compartment, pulled out a banana, peeled it in three bites, rolled down the window, and casually flicked the banana peel onto the road.

Rashid stared at him in disbelief.

“You're about to commit murder and that's the crime that bothers me,” Rauf said.

“Yes,” Rashid replied. “We're professionals. Assassination is business. Littering is bad upbringing.”

Rauf blinked.

Rashid continued, “Have some civic sense. If you dirty the city, where will future criminals work?”

Before Rauf could respond with something profoundly stupid, a glint of sunlight hit their windshield. A car turned into the lane—black, shiny, slow. The kind of slow that meant importance.

Rauf straightened. “Is that him?”

Rashid nodded, slipping the pistol from under his seat. “Yep. Showtime.”

The Fiat fell silent. The temple bells rang in the distance. A few pigeons flew overhead, as if personally blessing the moment.

Rauf watched them soar and whispered, “If one of them poops now, I swear to God it’s a sign.”

Rashid chambered a round. “If one of them poops now, we shoot the wrong target.”

Rauf swallowed. “Please don’t joke like that.”

“Relax,” Rashid muttered. “We’re professionals.”

Somewhere above, a pigeon cooed ominously.

And the Ambassador rolled to a stop.

Meanwhile, in another corner of the same street, Aatish Kapoor was pacing around rehearsing the greatest pitch of his life.

His master plan:

Meet Gulshan Kumar.

Praise him.

Explain his meteoric superstardom in Bangladesh.

Then convince Gulshan to rewrite *Pyaar Hain Tumse* as a story about a successful middle-aged singer rediscovering love.

(Aatish didn't say it out loud, but the "middle-aged singer" was, of course, himself.)

He was psyching himself up like a boxer before a match:

"Yes, Aatish, you are charismatic. You are destiny. You are… wait, is that blood pressure or excitement?"

And then—timing like a cosmic prank—Gulshan Kumar's Fiat rolled into the lane.

Both teams perked up.

Rashid straightened his kurta like he was preparing for a job interview.

Rauf checked his pistol, prayed he wouldn't drop it, and then almost dropped it immediately.

Aatish combed his hair with his fingers, rehearsing the smile he believed looked like Shah Rukh Khan but actually resembled a man squinting into the sun.

The temple became a stage.

Three men.

Two motives.

One completely unsuspecting music mogul.

As Gulshan stepped out of the car, Rashid elbowed Rauf.

"You shoot first," he said.

"Why me?" Rauf whispered. "I'm new. I might miss it."

"That's why you should do it. Learn by doing!"

"No, no, no. It's Gulshan Kumar, not a practice target!"

Rashid sighed, rolled his eyes, and muttered, "Fine. I'll do it. Always the senior citizen doing all the work."

He stepped down from the car and hovered toward Gulshan with the slow confidence of a man who had absolutely no backup plan if things went wrong.

Aatish spotted Gulshan heading toward the temple.

Showtime.

He began walking toward him, chest out, smile perfectly rehearsed, already delivering the speech inside his head.

"Sir, I am Aatish Kapoor, and what you need in your next film is—"

His destiny, however, had a different screenplay.

His polished shoe landed squarely on a banana peel lying innocently on the road—the very same one Rauf had tossed out of the car a minute earlier.

Aatish's feet immediately lost all loyalty to the rest of his body.

For one glorious second, he performed a movement that could only be described as classical ballet choreographed by gravity. One leg went north, the other negotiated with the south, his arms attempted every *yoga* pose ever existed, and his dignity quietly resigned.

He didn't trip on a stone.

He didn't trip on another person.

He tripped on poor civic sense.

Sliding forward like an overenthusiastic cricketer attempting a last-ball run, he crashed straight into Rashid… who, at that exact moment, had his pistol halfway out of his pocket.

For one absurd, beautiful moment, fate, negligence, and a potassium-rich fruit decided to collaborate.

They collided like two confused goats.

Rashid grunted.

Aatish yelped.

The gun clattered to the ground.

For a second, everyone froze.

Then Aatish saw the pistol.

Then he saw Rashid reaching for it.

Then he realised—oh God—this man was about to shoot Gulshan Kumar.

"HEY!" Aatish shouted, though he had no idea what to do next.

Rashid punched him in the nose.

The punch wasn't cinematic. It was messy, wet, and accompanied by the sound of someone stepping on a ketchup packet.

Blood spurted.

Aatish screamed.

Rashid screamed back and punched Aatish harder.

Aatish stumbled back into a fruit vendor's cart. Bananas flew. Grapes became projectiles. A pomegranate exploded like a small grenade.

His hand, by pure dumb luck, landed on a fruit knife.

He grabbed it purely for self-defence—or self-confidence, it was hard to tell.

Rashid lunged for his fallen pistol.

Aatish panicked.

He swung.

Not with skill.

Not with grace.

But with the blind panic of a man who has only fought stuntmen with safety mats.

The knife sailed through the air in a pathetic little arc.

It shouldn't have hit anyone.

But destiny has a sense of humour.

It stabbed directly into Rashid's right eye.

There was silence.

Then—

"FUCK! MY EYE! MY BEAUTIFUL EYE!"

Blood gushed out like someone had uncorked a human wine bottle.

The gush of blood wasn't a stream; it was a vicious, arterial spray. It erupted from the mangled orb like a piston, a thick, coppery geyser that instantly stained Rashid's face, neck, and chest.

It was the horrific uncorking of a human wine bottle, painting the chaos of scattered fruit in a grotesque, sticky crimson.

The eye itself, once a window to Rashid's vicious soul, was now just a jelly-like mess of white and red pulp around the embedded, vibrating blade.

People screamed.

Pigeons flew off dramatically.

A man dropped his coconut in slow motion.

RAUF MAKES THE WORST DECISION OF HIS LIFE

Rauf, seeing his associate in a puddle of disaster, panicked and pointed his gun at Gulshan Kumar.

Aatish noticed—finally.

He snatched up Rashid's dropped pistol.

It felt terrifyingly real—unlike the hollow toys he'd waved around on set.

He tried aiming at Rauf's hand, but precision had never been in his skillset.

He fired.

The heavy-caliber round didn't miss. It bypassed Rauf's hand and found his head.

Rauf didn't fall; he was pulverized. His body dropped like a meat sack, hitting the concrete with a final, limp slap. He was utterly extinguished.

The rookie's skull burst open like a watermelon dropped from a balcony.

The impact was a wet, obscene THWUMP, instantly followed by a gore-splattering detonation.His skull didn't just open; it vaporized under the brutal energy transfer, bursting like a six-

story gourd. Bone fragments, sharp as obsidian shards, scythed outwards.

Blood erupted in an atomized red cloud, a sticky, warm mist that instantly plastered nearest onlookers.

Grey and pink matter—fragments of brain and soft tissue—flew outward, slicking the pavement and spattering like hideous rain onto the faces, clothes, and purses of the screaming bystanders.

Rauf didn't fall; he was pulverized into the ground. His body dropped like a meat sack from which all tension had instantly fled, hitting the concrete with a final, limp slap.

He was not merely dead; he was extinguished, reduced from a man to a catastrophe in the space of a single, horrific millisecond, the grisly remnants of his final thought still clinging to the walls around him.

Meanwhile, Rashid kept screaming like a man who had just learned, the hard way, that eyeballs were never meant to hold cutlery.

The crowd's shriek was a single, monstrous wave of horror. Chaos turned physical: a woman collapsed, her fall buckling another, who struck a child and making a chain of falling humans.

People scattered in every direction—some running, some tripping, some doing both at once. Vendors abandoned their carts, fruits rolling across the street like confused escapees.

A man sprinted without looking back, dragging a stranger's dog he'd grabbed by mistake. Someone yelled "Call the police!" while someone else yelled "Don't look!" and kept looking anyway. A few froze in shock, staring with wide, glassy eyes, as if their brains had momentarily unplugged.

Within seconds, the orderly street had transformed into a panicked stampede of flailing arms, dropped bags, and adrenaline-fueled screaming. No one knew what had just happened—only that they wanted to be anywhere except here.

And then... Aatish collapsed too.

Not gracefully.

Not tragically.

But like a sack of wet laundry someone had thrown off a truck.

A mix of shock, exhaustion, and the multiple punches he'd collected like bonus points.

He hit the ground with such commitment that onlookers weren't sure whether to help him or applaud the performance.

Amid the exploding chaos, Gulshan Kumar stood rooted to the spot—eyes bulging, jaw hanging, looking like a man who had accidentally wandered into an action film when he'd only signed up for a devotional track.

He stared in utter disbelief as Aatish folded to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut, Rauf collapsed like a side character who'd just discovered his contract had expired,

Rashid sprinted around screaming with a fruit knife sticking out of his eye like the world's most unfortunate pirate accessory, and bewildered pedestrians began fainting one after another, creating a domino effect so perfectly choreographed it deserved a Filmfare Award for Best Crowd Performance.

Gulshan blinked rapidly, as if hoping the whole scene would disappear if he rebooted his eyes.

His driver, however, had no time for philosophical confusion.

He spotted his boss frozen in shock and immediately activated panic-driven professionalism.

"Sir! No time to process whatever this is!"

Before Gulshan could even form a sentence, the driver swooped in like an overcaffeinated hawk, grabbed him by the arm, and practically launched him into the backseat. It wasn't graceful. It wasn't gentle. It was a pure survival instinct.

Gulshan hit the seat with a thump, still dazed.

"What—what just happened? Why am I airborne? Was that man supposed to fall like that? Is this real?!"

But the driver was already in the front seat, slamming his foot on the accelerator.

The tyres screamed—a long, dramatic screech that sounded like a tortured violin—and the car shot forward.

Gulshan clutched the door, wide-eyed, breathless.

"I think I just watched three different genres of disaster happen at once!"

The driver, equally frazzled but pretending he wasn't, replied,

"Sir, whatever that was... we're not staying to watch the sequel."

And the car sped away, zigzagging out of the chaos like it had absolutely no interest in being part of the storyline.

Police arrived within minutes.

They found:

Rashid screamed with a knife in his eye.

Rauf's head in a state unsuitable for description.

Aatish Kapoor lying unconscious, holding a gun, covered in fruit and blood like a grocery store massacre survivor.

And Tuesday—ordinary, uneventful Tuesday—became the day Aatish Kapoor accidentally changed his fate with one stumble, one bad punch, one unlucky fruit knife, and one tragically misdirected bullet.

The next morning, Aatish Kapoor woke up in a hospital room smelling of Dettol and terrible life choices. His jaw was wrapped, his arm immobilised, and the nurse kept staring at him with the awe usually reserved for astronauts and freedom fighters.

Beside him sat a mountain of newspapers, each shouting a different heroic headline:

"REAL-LIFE RAMBO: AATISH KAPOOR FOILS UNDERWORLD HIT!"

"GULSHAN KUMAR LIVES—THANKS TO BOLLYWOOD'S NEW LIONHEART!"

"BOLLYWOOD STAR SAVES MUSIC TYCOON IN DRAMATIC STREET SHOOTOUT!"

"AATISH'S HEROICS PREVENT MAJOR TRAGEDY—CITY APPLAUDS ITS NEW ACTION STAR!"

"ONE GANGSTER DOWN, ONE WOUNDED: AATISH'S BRAVE INTERVENTION STEALS THE SPOTLIGHT!"

Aatish stared at the headlines, stunned.

"Me? A hero?" he whispered, half laughing.

He read on, cheeks lifting despite himself.

"Action star... wow."

He placed the paper down gently, feeling a warm jolt of pride in his chest.

"Maybe... maybe I actually did something good," he murmured, smiling wider.

On the chair next to him sat Anishka—slicing fruits with quiet fury, her jaw tighter than his bandages. She'd clearly been there all night.

Her hair was a mess, her eyes were tired, and her posture screamed "I haven't moved in eight hours except to threaten nurses who woke him up."

The empty coffee cups around her formed a small shrine to sleepless loyalty.

Every time Aatish twitched, she leaned forward instantly, equal parts worry and annoyance.

She hadn't left his side since he was wheeled in—keeping vigil, guarding him, and silently planning to smack him once he healed.

"Aatish," she said, not even looking up, "you lunatic. You fought hitmen. With a fruit knife."

Aatish shrugged. "The knife was sharp. Hitmen weren't."

Babloo slipped in behind her carrying a thermos, wearing the stunned expression of a man who'd discovered his boss had secret superpowers.

"Sir... the whole industry is talking. They say you fought two gangsters with bare hands."

"One hand," Aatish joked. "The other was holding fruit."

Anishka shot him a look. "Some even say you stared them down like Amitabh in *Deewar*."

"Maybe it was just a desperate attempt to save my ass," Aatish muttered.

Anishka sighed. "Same thing."

Before he could reply, the door opened with the drama of an awards-night entry.

In walked Gulshan Kumar—pristine kurta, saintlike smile, and a bouquet large enough to qualify as a garden.

"Mr. Kapoor..." he began, voice thick with emotion.

"...thank you. You saved my life. No hesitation. No fear. Just instinct."

Aatish straightened a bit, ignoring the itch under his bandage.

"When danger comes, sir," he said grandly, "an artist must rise."

(quietly, to himself) "...ideally without slipping."

Thankfully, Gulshan didn't catch that.

"I misjudged you," he continued. "Let me correct that."(beat)

He paused, the way producers do right before they drop a bomb that changes careers—or ruins them.

"The lead role in *Pyaar Hain Tumse...* is yours."

Silence. Thick enough to butter on toast.

Anishka inhaled so sharply the heart monitor beeped in sympathy.

Aatish, that's the least I can do to thank you for saving my life.", " he continued. Gulshan Kumar became emotional while saying it. Aatish's eyes welled up in response. Anishka watched

the exchange nervously, convinced that if the background music got any softer, the two men would hug, cry, kiss and accidentally start Bollywood's first producer-hero love story.

Babloo almost dropped the thermos - without even pretending he had control over it.

Aatish blinked once. Twice. He looked like a man who had accidentally opened the wrong door and walked straight into his destiny.

Gulshan continued, voice dripping with a mix of pride and mild scandal.

And Dhruv? Aatish asked

Forget about Dhruv. After his... educational relationship with his on-screen sister, I needed a new hero. Preferably one who keeps his romances outside the family tree.

He placed the massive bouquet on Aatish's lap like a coronation crown.

"You saved my life, Aatish. All I can do is give you the one thing Dhruv no longer has—his own movie."

Aatish just stared, stunned, as if the universe had suddenly decided to apologise.

He sat frozen, stunned, blinking like a man who had just been given a kingdom for winning a knife fight he barely understood.

Gulshan Kumar,(smiling warmly)

You're no reel hero, Mr. Kapoor. You are the real hero.

Aatish smiled back, finally soaking it in.

A bizarre Tuesday.

A fruit knife.

Exploding gangsters.

And now—the lead role of a lifetime.

Some men find glory.

Some men earn it.

Aatish Kapoor?

He stumbled into it and made it look legendary.

Aatish, sitting on Anishka's apartment balcony, let the rare quiet of the evening wash over him. He had finally been released from the hospital, bandages still fresh, and she had been taking care of him since he was discharged from hospital—checking his pulse, fussing over his meals, and making sure he didn't overexert himself.

The Mumbai skyline glittered in front of him, but his thoughts were elsewhere, savoring the simple relief of being alive.

Inside, the landline rang—shrill and insistent.

Anishka called out, "It's for you!"

Aatish picked up the receiver. Babloo's voice buzzed through with excitement:

"Sir! Two more movie offers!"

Aatish (Into phone, flatly):"Yes, Babloo... I know. Two more movie offers... No, I don't want to go to the after-party. Tell them I'm tired."

He hangs up. The silence is deafening. He runs a finger over the bandage on his arm, a permanent, slight scar beneath his shirt sleeve—a physical reminder of the day chaos and chance, not talent or perseverance, saved him.

He lights a cigarette and watches the skyline of the city. The message is clear: In Bollywood, you're only as good as your last Friday. Today, he is a god. Tomorrow, a new Dhruv Kumar might emerge, a new scandal might break, a new film might flop. The wheel never stops turning.

He looks at his reflection in the mirror—a face that has known the deepest valleys of rejection and is now perched on the most precarious of peaks. There is no joy in his eyes, only the quiet, terrifying knowledge of the game he is forever trapped in.

The Man in The Mirror

A few months later

Aatish Kapoor sat inside his vanity van, the flickering lights above adding a weary glow. Once a top star whose recent flops

had everyone whispering about his decline, his heroic stint had flipped the script. Bollywood now buzzed with admiration, treating him like a man who could turn real-life chaos into legend. And here he was, quietly reveling in the absurd pleasure of fame renewed overnight.He holds a glossy magazine on his lap. The cover screams:

"THE KING IS BACK!"

Aatish runs his thumb over his own face on the cover — the sculpted jaw, the perfect smile, the posture of a man who fears nothing.

And yet...

He isn't smiling.

He stares at the headline as though it's a courtroom verdict. After a long, suffocating silence, the thoughts he avoids start circling anyway—quiet, sharp, unforgiving.

Aatish lights up a cigarette, his eyes wandering into nothingness of his reflection on the mirror.

Aatish's thoughts unravel slowly, pulled loose by the weight of the headline on his lap.

"The King." They look at this face... this costume... this character... and they see a hero. Someone who never breaks. Someone who dances on mountain tops and fights ten villains without losing his breath.

But this...

(he touches his own cheek)

...this is the mask.

He taps his chest — once, twice — as if trying to remind himself he's alive underneath the glitter.

He exhales smoke, watching it fade—just like every "forever" star before him. The industry had taught him one truth: glory wasn't carved in stone, it was scribbled in pencil. One flop, one newer face, one louder rumour... and even kings were replaced without ceremony.

"Underneath? There's just a man. A man who gets heartburn from too much stress.

A man who lies awake at night wondering if he's still relevant".

A man whose hands shake before a big shot.

He exhales, long and tired.

"We actors are the most glorified and the most terrified species on the planet".

He picks up the magazine again, angry at how confidently the smiling face stares back at him.

"They forget we are human. We have the same fears — of being forgotten, replaced, not good enough. The only difference is... our failures are printed in seventy-two-point font for the whole country to read".

He laughs — bitter, hollow.

“When someone fails in a corporate office, maybe ten colleagues know. If someone in the HR department is bored, may be fifteen. But when we fail? Oh, it’s on every cover, every newspaper, every gossip column. “Tragic! Flop! Disaster! Decline!”

Our failures aren’t just noticed…

They’re celebrated.

He stands, looking at his reflection in the mirror

“For twenty years, I’ve given everything to this camera. Blood. Sweat. Sleep. Bones. I’ve danced till my feet bled, jumped off buildings, learned to cry on cue even when I felt nothing. Built a legacy brick by brick, film by film. And then… one Friday”.

One unlucky Friday. A badly made movie.

And some intern — a kid who has never seen a film set, never tasted the fear of performing — gets to write: “Aatish Kapoor’s career is over.”

Over. Just like that.

Does anyone tell a banker his career is finished because he missed one entry in a passbook? Does anyone tell a corporate employee he is now obsolete because he missed a deadline? No. They get a warning. Maybe a meeting. And then everyone moves on.

But us? We are not allowed to be human. We’re either gods on a pedestal or sacrifices at the altar of the box office.

There is nothing in between.

He stops pacing. His voice softens, filled with a childlike vulnerability.

And the most terrifying part?

I don't know anything else.

He sits on the vanity chair, head bowed.

"This is all I am. Take away the arc lights, the scripts, the dialogues, and what's left? A man fighting for survival in a world that's learning to fly while he still walks. A dinosaur watching birds he can never become".

Every day is a fight to prove I still belong. That I'm not a relic waiting to be forgotten.

His eyes glisten.

"From the time I can remember... I wanted to be an actor. To live lives I could never live in reality. To feel emotions I couldn't feel on my own. Acting is not just my job... it's my passion... and unfortunately, my compulsion.

I don't know accounting. I can't fix the refrigerator. I can't sell insurance. I only know how to become someone else".

And that's the cruel truth:

The only thing I'm good at... is pretending.

He picks up an autograph book lying nearby and smiles, "I feel happy when fans ask for signatures. Of course I do. But I always wonder... What happens when all this stops? What if

the same hand, now stretched out for an autograph, reaches out to pat the back of some younger star? How long until I'm a memory that people discuss only in nostalgia shows on late-night TV?" He looks at the pages for a long moment.

"That's the strange thing about stardom. It doesn't die in one day. It evaporates... one drop at a time. One Friday at a time. One headline at a time. One forgotten autograph at a time."

He closes the book gently.

"People say cinema is forever. They're wrong. Films may live forever. Stars don't. Every generation gets its own heroes. The old ones don't retire... they slowly become stories."

He smiles faintly.

"Maybe that's the deal we unknowingly signed. We spend our youth becoming larger than life... and spend the rest of our lives learning how to become ordinary again."

He looks into the mirror one last time.

"The tragedy isn't that one day they'll stop cheering. The tragedy is that when that day comes... I'll probably still be waiting to hear the applause."

There's a knock.

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Sir? They're ready for you. Your shot, sir.

The spell breaks.

Aatish straightens, smooths his hair, wipes the vulnerability from his face like makeup.

Aatish (loudly)

Coming.

He gives his reflection one last look — a silent farewell to the truth he must bury again.

Aatish,(soft, resigned, but brave) "**After all... the show must go on**".

He forces a smile.

The hero replaces the human.

And he walks out.

PHOENIX

Night. A late-night that feels like it has paused just for them.

Dhruv sits alone on the rusted iron chair of his small balcony, the kind that creaks even when no one is sitting on it. The city below is a blur of honking, murmuring, breathing chaos—but up here, it feels like the world has gone mute.

A thin ribbon of smoke rises from the cigarette between Dhruv's fingers, curling upward like it's searching for an exit from this life too. The smoke glows orange each time he takes a drag, briefly lighting up his face—tired eyes, faint stubble, a sadness that never asks for permission.

Raju pushes open the balcony door and steps out quietly, as if afraid the night might object to interruption. He doesn't speak. He simply sits beside Dhruv on the cold cement floor, his back resting against the railing.

For a long moment, neither of them says a word. Silence settles between them, heavy but familiar—like an old friend

who doesn't need to be entertained. Only the faraway howl of a dog and the soft crackle of Dhruv's cigarette dare disturb it.

Raju glances sideways at Dhruv.

Dhruv doesn't look back immediately. He just watches the city that almost swallowed him whole. Then—slowly—he turns, meets Raju's eyes, and the faintest smile forms. Not a happy smile... the kind of smile that carries bruises under it. The kind of smile that knows too much.

He exhales smoke, a long tired breath, and says quietly—

so quietly it feels like he's speaking to the night itself:

"I'll be back soon."

It isn't a promise.

It isn't a threat.

It's a prophecy—the kind only broken men can make, the kind the universe hears and shudders at.

Raju doesn't nod. He doesn't ask where. He doesn't ask when.

He just sits there, sharing Dhruv's silence, as if guarding it.

A sudden breeze sweeps across the balcony, scattering ash from the edge of the cigarette and carrying it into the darkness—like tiny pieces of a man drifting away, only to find their way back.

Dhruv stubs the cigarette, stands up slowly, almost ceremonially, and steps inside.

Raju remains seated, watching him disappear into the dimly lit room.

The balcony door swings shut behind Dhruv.

The night absorbs the final swirl of smoke.

And for the first time in a long time—

It feels like a beginning.

THE END