

WHAT LIES BEYOND!

Pavan Kumar Dasari



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PAVAN KUMAR DASARI

WHAT LIES BEYOND!

Forever in debt to



“Shree Ahobila Narasimha Swamy”.
Truth is eternal.

PAVAN KUMAAR DASARI

“The Editor” of my life & the book:

Prathyusha Ravipati

Cover page design by: Prathyusha Ravipati

PAVAN KUMAAR DASARI

Once my leader quoted,
and it stayed with me forever.

“కష్టాలు నీ ఒక్కళ్ళకే కాదు,
ఈ భూమి మీద ఉన్న ప్రతి జీవికి ఉన్నాయి.

జీవితం అంటే పూలపాన్పు కాదు...
ఎప్పుడు సంతోషమే కావాలి అంటే కుదరదు.
కొంచం బాధలు కూడా భరించడం నేర్చుకోవాలి.
అలా భరించేవాళ్ళకే భూమి మీద బ్రతికే హక్కు ఉంది.
పిరికివాళ్ళకి ఇక్కడ చోటు లేదు... భయపడితే చచ్చిపో.

గుండ్రంగా తిరిగేదే భూమి...
కాలేదే నిప్పు...
పోరాడేవాడే మనిషి.

నువ్వు మనిషివైతే... జీవితంతో పోరాడు.”

Always grateful to
Shri. Konidela Pawan Kalyan garu

About the Author

Pavan Kumaar Dasari is a writer whose words are rooted in honesty, emotion, and a deep sense of purpose. He does not write merely for entertainment; his thoughts are guided by a heartfelt desire to uplift society and nurture a more peaceful, harmonious world. His reflections often explore how Dharma, the path of righteousness, responsibility, and truth can guide individuals and communities towards balance and justice.

With a strong moral compass, Pavan approaches life and writes with sincerity. He sees the world not just as it is, but as it could be more compassionate, more just, more conscious. His fictional worlds are shaped by this vision rich with meaning, grounded in values, and brimming with hope. Each character, conflict, or resolution he pens often mirrors deeper philosophical questions or societal dilemmas, encouraging readers to think, reflect, and grow.

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Preface

Every journey begins with a question - sometimes whispered, sometimes buried, sometimes loud enough that the universe itself responds. **WHAT LIES BEYOND!** was born from such a question, one that has lingered in the hearts of many: what happens when two lives, shaped by different worlds, are drawn together by destiny?

At its core, this story follows two individuals from distant countries. One seeks truth within her great-great-grandfather's journal, hoping to feel the presence of God. The other moves through life caught in a web of confusion, shaped by a lie he never chose but silently carried for years. Neither knows what awaits them, yet the universe does.

“What Lies Beyond!” is not merely the story of few people. It is a journey towards understanding one's reason and purpose in life. It reflects how the universe guides us - gently yet precisely, when the time is right. The title itself holds the answer: an invitation to look beyond our thoughts, beyond our mindsets, beyond what our eyes can see, and beyond the limits of our present reality.

Sit back and enjoy!

— Pavan Kumaar Dasari

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Disclaimer:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and events are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, actual events, or real locales is purely coincidental.

The story may include references to historical events, cultural practices, or public figures, but they have been adapted for the purpose of fiction. The author does not intend to accurately represent any historical facts or offend any group, community, or individual.

This book is meant solely for entertainment and creative expression.

PAVAN KUMAAR DASARI

WHAT LIES BEYOND!

WHAT LIES BEYOND!

01 **THE AMERICANS**

On a bright and sunny day, **Liam** is rushing out of his lab, backpack slung over one shoulder as he hurries to catch the bus. He is originally from Liverpool, a sharp biology student with a dry sense of humor. His British accent has a way of drawing quiet admiration wherever he goes. He works part time at a library. As he walks, his phone buzzes just as he steps onto the main road. It's Hudson. "*Yeah?*" Liam answers, slightly out of breath. "*Dude, I'm running a bit late. I'm coming with Oli,*" Hudson says.

Hudson, who grew up in a small town in Oregon, is a psychology major who thrives on humor and loves to make people laugh. He's deeply empathetic. Lives with Liam in a shared apartment. And works part time with Olivia at P&A Mart, a local supermarket. Oli short for **Olivia**, she's from Chicago, a bold and quick-witted STEM student, full of restless energy and an effortless confidence that tends to take over any space she walks into.

A few minutes later, the three of them meet at the spot they agreed on earlier. They linger near the pavement, glancing occasionally at passing buses, waiting for the last member of their group.

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Olivia turns to Liam. *“Did she call you?”* *“No, she didn’t,”* he replies, checking his phone. As the seconds stretch, Hudson pulls out his phone and calls her. She picks up almost instantly. *“Haz, we’re waiting. Where are you?”* he asks. *“Coming! Coming. Just two more minutes. I’ve almost reached,”* she says, slightly breathless. *“Alright, no hurry. Take your time. We’ll just be sleeping here on the pavement,”* He jokes.

Hazel is originally from Auckland. A physics student, she’s quiet and thoughtful, always observing more than she says. Her mind works through layers of ideas. She works part-time at a Subway outlet. Also a bookworm. They are all pursuing their studies at Columbia University.

The four friends walk towards Rockefeller Centre after a long day. 8th Avenue, New York City, the sidewalks are crowded, yellow cabs honk from every corner, and halfway down the street, Olivia suddenly jumps with a loud, *“Oh, crap! Something’s stuck to my shoe.”* Hudson turns around. *“What?”* Hazel leans forward, peeking at her shoe, and says, *“Eww... Gum!”* Liam smirks, *“Ugh, this road is in dodgy condition.”* Olivia balances awkwardly on one foot, holding the wall, and groans. *“Fantastic. I’m out here doing a one-legged dance while the city watches.”*

Hazel pulls a toothpick from her bag and hands it to her. Olivia looks at her in surprise, *“You carry toothpicks? Seriously?”* Hazel shrugs, *“For emergencies, babe. And this qualifies as one.”* She pokes at the gum,

breaks the first toothpick, grabs another, and finally scrapes it off with a sigh of relief. “*Who even spits gum on roads?*” she says. The other three look at her silently, then say in unison, “*YOUUUU.*”

She freezes, then laughs awkwardly, “*Okay, fine. But that was one time. I’ve changed now.*” Hudson chuckles, “*I heard that. I’ll testify if needed.*” Liam wrinkles his nose, “*I’m gutted. This road stinks worse than my lab.*” Hudson glances over, “*That’s sad.*” Then, looking back at Olivia, he adds, “*You done? You’re walking like the gum’s still haunting you.*” “*I swear I can still feel it,*” she says.

By the time they reach Rockefeller Centre, everyone is tired and hungry. Hazel stretches, “*Guys, I’m starving. Can we eat something outside today?*” Olivia lights up immediately, “*Yes. Finally, someone said it.*” Hudson sighs, “*Can we even afford to eat outside?*” Liam turns around and looks at him, “*But you can afford to spend on dates.*” Hudson responds with an awkward smile, “*Shit.*”

Liam nods and responds to Hazel, “*Let’s eat something here.*” “*Anything works for me,*” Olivia says. “*Burger,*” Hudson adds. “*Pizza,*” Hazel says confidently. Liam laughs while walking, “*Of course. One says burger, one says pizza. Welcome to democracy.*” Hudson suddenly points ahead. “*Guys, look. An Indian restaurant. ‘Jana Gana Mana.’*” Olivia grins, “*Never tried Indian food. Why not?*” Hazel sighs, “*Do they have Indian-style pizza?*” Liam chuckles, “*You and pizza need a breakup,*

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mate. Come on now."

They step inside. The place feels warm and welcoming, with golden lighting, gentle 'Veena' music, and the rich smell of spices floating in the air. "*Holy crap,*" Olivia whispers. "*This place looks royal.*" "*Yeah,*" Hudson says with a nod, glancing around. "*And probably costs royal too.*"

A neat-looking young man approaches them with a polite smile. "*Hello, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Naraayan. Welcome. Please, have a seat.*" Liam smiles, "*Thanks, mate.*" Hudson says, "*Look, man, we're starving. We saw the place and decided our stomachs needed saving.*"

Olivia nods, "*Yeah, we didn't even check the prices.*" Naraayan smiles, "*No problem. I'll bring you some water and menus.*" They sit down, and as Hazel looks around, she notices a nearby table where a group of Indians, and a few Americans, eat with visible delight. She watches one man carefully mix curry with rice as if he is performing an art. "*Guys,*" Hazel whispers, "*Nine o'clock. Look at that table.*" Olivia looks over, "*What about it?*" "*Just watch,*" she says. The man slowly scoops up the curry and rice, adjusts the spoon, and takes a bite with a blissful expression, saying, "*Mmmmmmm.*" The four friends stare, open-mouthed.

Olivia leans forward, "*Okay. Whatever that is, I want it. I want to know what he's eating and why he looks like he saw heaven.*" Just then, Naraayan returns with water

and menus. The group exchanges glances like *'Who is going to ask?'* Liam looks at Hazel, *"You do it."* Hazel shakes her head, *"No way. That's awkward."* She gently pushes Olivia, *"You do it."*

Olivia clears her throat, *"Ahem! So... Naraayan, what's the, um... most irresistible curry on the menu? Like, the one that screams, 'Eat me right now?'"* Liam and Hudson exchange looks. *"GOD! What is she doing?"* Naraayan smiles politely, *"That would be our South Indian fish curry, ma'am. Very flavorful, a little spicy."* Liam squints, *"I don't think that's what the other guy is eating."* Hazel leans forward, *"Be honest. What's the guy at that table eating?"* Naraayan looks over, *"Ah, that's Butter Chicken, Punjabi style. It's one of our specials."*

Hudson asks cautiously, *"Is it spicy?"* *"Not at all,"* Naraayan replies, *"Rich and creamy."* Olivia says immediately, *"Okay, we want that. Two Butter Chickens, please."* Hudson adds, *"Bring some rice and naan with it. That should be enough for four, right?"* *"Absolutely,"* Naraayan says, nods politely before walking away.

As soon as he leaves, Olivia looks around the table. *"Saved you all."* Liam smirks, *"Excellent flirting, love."* Hazel laughs, looking at Olivia, *"Eat me now."* Hudson laughs and leans back. *"If that butter chicken tastes half as good as it looks, I may bring Amelia tomorrow night."* Liam nods, *"First, we gotta pay the rent, mate."* Everyone laughs.

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The dishes arrive steaming hot, filling the air with the scent of butter, garlic, and rich spices. Naraayan carefully places the plates on the table, a basket of naan with a bowl of rice in the center, and two bowls of golden-orange curry that look almost too beautiful to touch. Olivia leans in first. *“Oh my god. It smells... great.”* Hudson chuckles. *“Alright, alright. Let’s dig in.”*

Liam tears a piece of naan, dips it into the creamy curry, and takes a bite. His eyes widen, then he leans back in silence. For a second, no one speaks. Hazel, curious, asks, *“Well?”* Liam grins, *“I think I just met God, and he’s Indian.”* The table bursts into laughter.

Olivia quickly follows, scooping a bite of butter chicken with rice. The flavor hits her instantly, rich, buttery, perfectly balanced, *“Mmmmmmm,”* she hums, eyes closed. *“I get it now. I totally get it.”* The other two join in, tasting their portions. Soon, all four of them are too busy eating to talk. Only the sound of soft chewing and quiet *“Mmmm”* noises fill the air. They are not even embarrassed about it.

Olivia points her fork in the air. *“Okay, whoever invented Butter Chicken deserves a Nobel Prize.”* Hudson laughs, *“For peace?”* *“Dude! For happiness,”* she says seriously, and everyone agrees. Hazel smiles quietly, enjoying every bite. For someone who prefers pizza, is already planning to come back. *“You know,”* she says softly, *“This food feels like comfort. Like home, even when it isn’t yours.”* Liam looks at her and nods, *“Yeah. That’s the best kind of food.”*

By the time they finish, everyone's plate is spotless. Liam is the last to eat, slowly wiping the final bit of curry with a piece of naan. "*I regret nothing,*" he says proudly. Hudson pats his stomach, "*Same. Boy, I ate too much.*" Olivia laughs, sipping the last bit of her Coke, "*That was totally worth breaking the budget.*" They thank the Chef and Naraayan, pay the bill, and step out into the cool New York night. It feels like the perfect ending to an ordinary, hectic day.

Hudson stretches, "*Alright, back to reality.*" Liam nods, "*Yeah.*" Hazel smiles, "*Movie next weekend?*" "*Yep,*" Hudson agrees. Olivia adjusts her jacket, "*Dude! I have to follow timings. My landlord stares at me if I am late.*" Liam laughs, "*Tell them you are doing some research.*" She responds, "*Nothing works.*" Hazel smiles softly, "*And I'm going back to my quiet little den. Just me, the fridge, and my books.*" Hudson chuckles, "*Sounds peaceful.*" They all stand for a moment, smiling at each other. The wind picks up, carrying the distant sound of a saxophone from a street performer.

Olivia breaks the silence. "*So, same time next week?*" Liam and Hudson answer immediately, "*Yeah.*" Hazel nods with a laugh, "*Great!*" And with that, they head off on their own paths.

The night deepens by the time Olivia reaches the house where she stays as a paying guest. The lights inside are still on. As soon as she opens the door, Mr. and Mrs. Rogers, the middle-aged American couple, turn to her from the living room couch. Their eyes speak before

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their mouths do, the kind of stare that isn't curious, just quietly judgmental. Olivia pauses, one foot still inside the doorway. "*What?*" she asks flatly, already sensing the tone. Mrs. Rogers crosses her arms. "*We have growing kids here, Olivia. We don't want them thinking it's fine to come home this late.*" Olivia blinks. "*It's the weekend and barely eleven.*" "*That's late enough for an example,*" the woman replies curtly.

Olivia's jaw tightens. She can feel the heat rising, words forming at the edge of her tongue, but she stops herself. She forces a tired smile. "*Let's talk tomorrow, okay? I'm exhausted.*" Without waiting for a response, she turns and climbs the stairs to her room. Behind her, the couple exchanges looks, the kind that makes her stomach twist. She shuts her door gently, leans against it for a moment, and then sighs.

Across the city, Hazel unlocks the door to her small one-bedroom apartment. The quiet wraps around her like a blanket. She slips off her shoes, sets her bag on the study table, and sits down in front of her laptop. Her screen glows softly as she begins to upload the photos from their dinner, the restaurant, the butter chicken, and a few blurry selfies that Olivia has taken. She smiles faintly as she types the caption: "*New York nights. Indian food. Great friends. Totally worth the gum incident.*"

She stares at it for a moment before hitting the post. Then she leans back in her chair, looking around the tidy little room. The walls are plain, except for a photo

of her great-great-grandfather, her Poppy, an explorer, pinned above the desk. She whispers to herself, “*One more day survived,*” then smiles and switches off the lamp.

Meanwhile, Liam and Hudson step into the elevator of their apartment building. Liam presses the button for the fifth floor. The faint buzz of the old lift fills the silence. Liam rubs his eyes, “*I’ll be late tomorrow,*” he says. Hudson turns his head, curious. “*Lab work?*” “*No, meeting my professor about the genetics project,*” Liam replies. Hudson grins, “*Okay! And I’ve got a date tomorrow night.*” Liam smirks, “*Just don’t spend too much, mate. We’ve got bills waiting.*” Hudson shrugs, “*Damn it. A man’s gotta invest in happiness sometimes.*” The elevator dings. They step out, walk down the hallway, and unlock their apartment door.

Inside, the place is modest but cozy, with two bedrooms, a shared kitchen, and a sofa. Hudson walks straight to the fridge, pulls out two beers, and tosses one to Liam. “*Cheers,*” he says, popping his open. Liam takes a sip and sits on the couch. Hudson leans against the counter, staring at the floor thoughtfully. “*You know,*” he says, “*Sometimes I feel like I wanna be alone. No girlfriend, no attachments. Just peace.*” Liam doesn’t look up. “*And?*” He sighs, “*The next day, I miss being committed. It’s weird.*” Liam chuckles, standing up. “*You say this every week.*” “*I do?*” he asks. “*Yeah,*” Liam says, walking towards his bedroom, “*and I stop caring every week, too.*” He closes the door behind him, leaving Hudson staring at his beer can. He takes

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another sip, smiles faintly, and mutters to himself, “*Maybe tomorrow will be different.*” He turns off the kitchen light, and the apartment now wraps itself in a calm, sleepy silence.

The following week unfolds quietly, each of them catching up in their own little worlds. For Liam, life moves at its usual, boring pace. His days at the university feel longer than they should. Between lectures and his part-time shift at the library, he barely speaks to anyone. The silence of the library suits him. He sits behind the counter, stamping due dates, watching students walk in groups, laughing, whispering, sharing things. His phone mostly stays silent, except for a few texts from Hudson about girls, groceries, or splitting bills.

At the end of the day, he boards the bus home, earphones in, the same roads, the same thoughts. Listening to ‘*Wake me up when September ends.*’ Sometimes he wonders if life is waiting for him to do something... or if it has already moved ahead without him.

Across town, Olivia goes through a rough week. Her disagreements with the landlords move from polite warnings to pointed comments. It all starts again on Wednesday night when she returns from her supermarket shift. She quietly tries to unlock the door, but Mrs. Rogers waits in the hallway. “*Olivia,*” she says sharply, “*This is becoming a habit. It’s almost eleven.*” Olivia sighs, “*I told you, my shift ends late. I can’t*

control that.” The woman folds her arms, “We have discussed this on the first day.” Olivia stares at her, exhausted, *“You keep saying ‘bad example’! For what? Working hard?!”* Mr. Rogers appears behind his wife, giving Olivia the same judgmental look she has grown to hate. She drops her bag on the floor, *“You know what? Let’s not do this right now. I’m tired.”* and walks away. In her room, she sits on the bed, puts on her headphones, and listens to *‘Complicated’* by Avril Lavigne. That night, she decides she’ll move out soon, even if it means finding a small place on her own.

Meanwhile, Hazel’s week takes a gentle turn. Between her college classes and her shifts at Subway, she has a little time to rest, and she finds peace in small things: a cup of coffee by the window, a quiet walk after work, and lately, the book she is reading. It is her Poppy’s old journal. The pages are yellowed and fragile, filled with stories and hand-drawn maps of India’s ancient temples. She reads about the carvings of Mahabalipuram, the echoing corridors of Hampi, and legends surrounding the temples of Thanjavur.

Each night, she reads a few pages before bed. Her imagination takes her to those places, the smell of stone, the sound of temple bells, the feeling of history breathing through dust. She smiles softly to herself. *“Maybe I’ll go there someday,”* she whispers.

Back in the apartment, things aren’t going smoothly. Hudson and his girlfriend, Amelia, have been fighting for days. It starts with a small misunderstanding, a

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missed text, a late reply, an assumption that turns into an accusation. By Friday, they can't hold it together. Hudson ends the call with a long exhale and sits down on the couch. Liam, back from his library shift, notices the silence. "*What happened to you?*" he asks, keeping his hands on his waist. There is a pause. Hudson stares outside through the window. Liam moves to the fridge and opens the door to get a beer, but closes it and looks at him again. "*You two broke up?*" he asks quietly. Hudson nods. There is another pause.

"*She doesn't trust me anymore,*" he adds. Liam doesn't know what to say. He goes back to the fridge, opens the door, grabs two beers, and hands one over. Hudson takes a sip and mutters, "*Sometimes I feel I don't need anyone. I'm better alone.*" Liam leans against the counter, tired. "*You've said that a hundred times, mate.*" Hudson smiles half-heartedly. "*Damn yeah. And you'll hear it a hundred more.*" Liam shakes his head, approaches him, hugs him for a couple of seconds, and disappears into his room, leaving Hudson staring at his bottle in his hand, a feeling of emptiness inside.

Everyone seems to be chasing something: peace, freedom, love, or just a sense of belonging. And though they don't know it yet, their quiet, separate struggles are slowly pulling their lives closer together, towards another weekend that would change everything a little more.

Days pass, and Hazel can't put the book down anymore. What begins as curiosity turns into quiet

fascination. Every night, after her shift, she comes home, makes herself a cup of coffee, and opens her poppy's journal. She reads about the ancient Shiva temples that lie astonishingly close along the 79° east alignment, stretching from Kedarnath in the North to Rameswaram in the South. The idea of how the sages and temple architects thousands of years ago could create such perfect geographical harmony fascinates her. The journal also states that these temples are not just structures of worship, but markers of a deeper intelligence, a silent message left across the landscape. The more she learns, the more she feels drawn into the mystery, wondering how such precision, purpose, and spiritual symbolism could exist long before modern tools and technology.

Then she comes across a chapter about Tirumala, one of the most visited and popular temples of the Kali Yuga, described as a spiritual mountain of belief, faith, and stories that has survived for centuries. It also mentions that it is among the richest religious places in the world, worth billions of dollars. But she isn't interested in its wealth. She is drawn to something deeper, the idea that millions of people travel from faraway places just to see their god, carrying their hopes, tears, and gratitude. It amazes her how faith can unite so many people beyond logic and science.

That evening, she meets Liam at a small café near their campus for a coffee break. She looks excited as she places her cup down and leans forward. "*Liam, do you know about Tirumala?*" He shakes his head, stirring his

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coffee slowly. "I think I heard the name somewhere, Haz." She smiles. "It's a temple in the southern part of India. My poppy wrote about it in his journal. He called it one of the holiest places of the Kali Yuga. Can you believe people donate so much gold and money there? But that's not the part that interests me. It's faith." Liam listens, his usual calm face shows a flicker of curiosity. *"Sounds like something worth reading. I'll check if we have anything about it in the library."* Hazel smiles gratefully, *"You really would?" "Yeah,"* he says, sipping his coffee. *"I like stories that last thousands of years."*

Later that night, Hazel calls Olivia. The conversation starts with her usual cheerful tone, but quickly turns serious when Olivia mentions that her landlords had an argument again with her.

Hazel (sighs): *"You can't live like that, Oli. They don't deserve your patience."*

Olivia (agrees): *"Yeah, I've had enough. I'm packing this weekend. I'll look for something nearby."*

Hazel: *"Why don't you stay with me for some days and then we look for places? My room's small, but we can make it work. I don't mind sharing."*

There is silence for a moment, Olivia laughs softly.

Olivia: *"You're serious?"*

Hazel: *"Of course. You'll just have to deal with my weird reading hours."*

Olivia (relieved): *"Deal. I'll move in next week."*

That night, Olivia feels lighter, finding a place to breathe again.

Meanwhile, things aren't going well for Hudson. After his breakup, his days turn into quiet routines and late evenings filled with beer bottles. That Friday, after his supermarket shift, he wanders around the streets, half-drunk and restless. By midnight, he can't walk straight anymore. He sits down near the pavement outside his building, mumbling to himself, the city lights blur around him. Hours pass. People walk by, some look at him, some don't. It is around 2 a.m. when a woman from his apartment, *Clara*, returning from her night shift, notices him lying awkwardly in the corner. At first, she finds it unusual, but when she looks closer, she recognizes him. "*Hudson?*" she whispers. "*You live on the fifth floor, right?*"

He groans softly in response. Clara sighs, bends down, and grabs his shoulder. "*God, you're heavy,*" she mutters, half-dragging him to the building entrance. The security guard helps open the door, and together they get him into the lift. By the time they reach the fifth floor, Hudson is half-asleep. Clara unlocks his door with the key from his pocket, guides him inside, and drops him gently on the couch. "*You stink, idiot,*" she mutters before leaving, shaking her head. He sleeps soundly, unaware of how low he has fallen and how lucky he is that someone cared enough to drag him home. After the hectic lab-work, Liam reaches the apartment an hour post the incident, he looks at Hudson and mutters "*God! He fell asleep on the couch again.*"

The next morning, sunlight creeps through the curtains

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opens it to find a woman standing there, neatly dressed, holding her phone in one hand and a slightly amused expression on her face.

“Hi,” she says, “You must be Hudson’s roommate?” Liam nods, *“Yeah. Liam.”* extending his hand. *“I’m Clara,”* she says, shaking his hand. *“From 7B. I think I saved your friend’s life last night.”* Liam blinks, then sighs surprisingly. *“Oh! You brought him back? I can’t thank you enough. He’s... uh, going through a rough patch.”*

Clara nods understandingly. *“Breakup?”* she asks *“Yeah, plural.”* He responds. She laughs softly. *“Well, he owes me a coffee for carrying him up five floors.”* *“Deal,”* he says, *“And maybe a lifetime of embarrassment too.”*

Just as they laugh, a groggy voice comes from the couch. *“Why is my head spinning? And who’s talking about me?”* Hudson sits up, hair messy, eyes half-open, still wearing yesterday’s jeans. He looks around like he is waking up in a stranger’s house. She crosses her arms, pretending to look annoyed. *“Morning, hero. Slept well?”* Hudson frowns. *“Who are you?”* *“I’m the one who rescued you from the pavement,”* she says matter-of-factly. *“You were giving a TED Talk to a lamppost about how life is unfair.”* Liam bursts out laughing, leaning against the kitchen counter. *“Oh mate, that sounds like you.”* Hudson rubs his face in disbelief. *“Please tell me you’re kidding.”* She smirks, *“Nope. I even thought about recording it. You were*

singing an '80s song." "Which one?" Liam asks, laughing. "I think it's 'Careless Whisper'" she responds.

Hudson groans, burying his face in a cushion. "God, kill me now." Liam laughs again, saying, "You are crazy!" She chuckles and adds, "Anyway, you're safe now. Try not to repeat your pavement adventures, alright?" Hudson peeks through his fingers, still embarrassed, but smiles a little. "Thanks, I guess." "Don't take it seriously, easy boy," she says, winking before heading out. As the door closes, Liam looks at Hudson with a teasing grin, "So... new friend?" Hudson looks at him and smiles. "Well... she's interesting."

Across the town, Olivia drags her suitcase up Hazel's building stairs, her hair tied into a messy bun and her face glowing with excitement. Hazel opens the door even before she knocks. "There you are!" Hazel says, grinning, "Finally escaped?" Olivia drops her bag with a dramatic sigh. "Don't even say that word. If I had stayed another day, I'd have started charging them rent for my patience." Hazel laughs, "Well, welcome to the club of freedom. This is our new shared kingdom, one bedroom, one bathroom, and zero judgment." "Perfect," Olivia says, looking around the cozy space, a tiny kitchen, a small study table, and a soft green curtain by the window. "I've been here a million times, but never thought I'd be living with you. I love it already."

They spend the rest of the day rearranging things. Hazel moves her books to make space for Olivia's

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skincare collection, and Olivia finds a corner for her juicer. In the evening, they order pizza, sit on the floor, and write down expenses in Hazel's notebook. "*So we split rent and groceries,*" Hazel says. "*You handle the food, I'll take care of Wi-Fi and power.*" "*Deal,*" Olivia says, raising her glass of vodka like a toast. "*And on weekends, we explore the city or just binge something weird.*" "*Agreed,*" Hazel smiles, "*But we're not watching any horror again.*" Olivia laughs, "*Oh, come on, that last movie wasn't that bad.*" "*You literally screamed at your own reflection,*" Hazel replies, rolling her eyes. They both laugh until their stomachs hurt.

It's been weeks as their lives find a bit of rhythm, classes, part-time shifts, WhatsApp chats, and weekend calls that sometimes stretch late into the night. One Saturday evening, the four decide to meet at a café near Central Park. It isn't a fancy place, just a small, cozy café with wooden chairs and warm yellow lights. In the background, '*Calma*' by Pedro Capó plays softly. Liam, as usual, wears a light blue shirt and denim jeans, arrives first, already seated at a corner table with a chilled beer. Hazel comes next, waving as she enters, her hair tied back loosely, a small tote bag hanging from her shoulder. Olivia and Hudson follow, talking about something ridiculous from work and laughing like school kids.

"*Finally,*" Liam says, raising his bottle. "*It's been forever since we all sat together like this.*" "*Yeah, I missed this,*" Olivia says, sliding into the seat beside Hazel. Hudson raises an eyebrow, taking a sip of his beer, "*You mean you missed teasing me?*" Olivia smirks, "*Tell us about Clara.*" Hudson laughs. He closes his

eyes. “Fu—ah, sorry.” Then adds, “Cute and hot.” He continues, “*You know... sometimes...*” Liam cuts him off. “*Shut up, man.*” They all laugh.

After a few minutes of small talk about classes and work shifts, Liam turns towards Hazel, his tone shifting to something quieter, more thoughtful. “*Haz... remember the name you mentioned?*” Hazel’s eyes brighten immediately. “*What?*” “*I found something related in the library,*” Liam says, leaning forward. “*It’s about Tirumala, the temple you told me about. You were right. It’s been standing for centuries, one of the oldest and richest temples in the world. There are books written about it, the mountains, the architecture, even the energy patterns around the hills.*” He pauses. “*And you wanna see something fascinating?*” He unlocks his phone, showing a picture. “*Devotees have to travel seven huge hills from Tirupati to Tirumala just to see the god’s idol. Even the hills look like their god, Venkateshwara if you see it vertically. See. Isn’t it amazing?*”

Olivia and Hazel look at the picture, and they can’t believe what they are seeing. Hazel’s expression softens into a quiet, satisfied smile. “*I knew it. My poppy wasn’t crazy.*” Hudson, who has been lazily playing with his beer coaster, looks up. “*Wait, wait, what are you guys even talking about? Some kind of temple?*” Olivia jumps in before Hazel. “*Yeah. You know Haz’s Poppy was an explorer and scientist. He wrote in his journal about ancient Indian temples, cultures, symbols, all that stuff. She’s been reading them lately.*”

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The mountains of Tirumala, resemble
the face of Lord Venkateshwara
Swamy.

Hudson tilts his head, pretending to be impressed. *“Ah. Not interested.”* Liam chuckles. *“Trust me, there is something about it.”* Hazel rolls her eyes and looks at Hudson. *“It’s not boring. It’s fascinating. Do you realize that some of these temples existed before most modern civilizations even began? The architecture, the precision, it’s almost impossible to explain with the tools they had.”* Hudson leans back in his chair, smirking. *“Or maybe it’s just stories that grew bigger with time. You know how people exaggerate.”* Hazel frowns slightly but stays calm, *“Maybe. But some things can’t be explained away that easily. If something’s been standing for a thousand years, maybe there’s a reason.”*

Olivia nods, *“She has a point. I mean, we believe in a lot of things without proof, like luck, love, astrology...”* Hudson laughs, *“Love exists. I just have bad luck with it.”* Liam chuckles and pulls out his phone. *“Here, look,”* he says, scrolling quickly. *“Look at these pictures.”* He turns the screen around. A golden temple stands under a misty hill, surrounded by clouds, pilgrims, and ancient stone carvings. Hudson squints at the screen, sipping his beer slowly. *“That’s... actually beautiful. Those hills remind me of my place: Oregon.”*

Hazel smiles. *“See? Told you.”* Hudson nods, scrolling through more pictures. *“Wait, this place gets like fifty, sixty thousand visitors a day? That’s insane.”* *“More, sometimes,”* Liam says. *“People donate millions. Gold, jewellery, even their hair as an offering.”* Olivia’s eyes widened. *“Their hair?!”* *“Yeah,”* Hazel says softly. *“It’s symbolic, like giving away vanity. My poppy wrote that.”*

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Hudson stares at the image a moment longer, thoughtful. *"Wow. This looks like a big forest."* Liam smiles knowingly, *"That's what I thought too."* Olivia nods slowly. Hudson takes another sip, leans back, and smirks, *"Alright, alright. I admit, this one doesn't sound so boring after all."* Hazel laughs. *"Victory!"* she says, raising her glass. *"To me."* They all raise their glasses, clinking lightly.

The laughter returns, blending with the soft music in the café. Liam looks at Hazel and smiles quietly. *"You know,"* he says, *"Maybe your poppy was right about one thing. Some mysteries are worth chasing."* Hazel smiles back. *"Then let's chase it."* Olivia grins. *"But first, another round?"* Hudson laughs, raising his hand. *"Now that's the kind of faith I believe in."* That evening, after their gathering ends, they walk out into the cool night air. Hudson hums something under his breath; Hazel is already talking about her shift the next morning, and Olivia yawns, stretching her arms.

Liam's phone buzzes; it's his father. He steps aside to take the call, his expression turns serious.

Liam(quietly): *"What happened, Dad?"* A pause.

Liam's father (almost whispering): *"Mom's sick... Is it possible for you to come home?"*

Liam: *"Okay, I'll be there soon."*

When he hangs up, the others notice his face has changed. *"Everything okay?"* Hazel asks. Liam nods slowly, *"Mom's not well. I'm heading home for a few days."* Olivia touches his arm gently, *"Take care, Liam."*

Don't worry about anything." "I'll tell the library manager," Liam replies, "Hazel, can you help cover my shifts until I'm back?" Hazel hesitates but nods, "Yeah, I can manage. Don't worry."

The next morning, Liam packs a small bag, leaves a message with his library supervisor, and leaves. At the library, Hazel starts her temporary new routine. She works extra hours after her Subway shift, balancing her part-time job and Liam's replacement duty. She is tired but doesn't complain; the quiet of the library gives her peace. The scent of old paper, the sound of pages turning, and the occasional whisper from students make her feel oddly calm.

The next day, Olivia wakes up with a headache and a sore throat. She decides to skip her shift at the supermarket and stay home. The apartment is unusually quiet. Wrapped in a blanket, she sits on the couch with a mug of hot coffee and starts scrolling through travel videos on YouTube, beaches, mountain towns, and people exploring the world. "*Lucky people,*" she murmurs, "*They just pack and go.*" She smiles faintly at the thought of a trip with her friends, something simple, maybe once everyone's life calm down. The videos play in the background, their soft music filling the empty living room.

Hudson's week turns out surprisingly good. His professor finally returns their semester project results. He has spent weeks researching '*Emotional Conditioning and Human Adaptation in Urban Life*': a

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topic he chose because it reflects what he sees around him every day: people pretending to be fine, hiding under noise and busyness. When the professor hands back his paper, there is a small handwritten note at the top: *'Strong analysis. Good work.'* Hudson never admits it out loud, but getting that recognition means a lot to him. He feels proud and calls Olivia.

Hudson (with his voice full of energy): *"You won't believe it. Top of the class. The professor actually wrote a special note."*

Olivia (smiles, her voice still hoarse): *"That's great, buddy. I'm really happy for you. Also, come to our place."*

Hudson (laughs): *"Yup, I'll be there in an hour."*

Knock, knock!

Hudson steps into Olivia's place, saying with a grin, *"Your voice on the call told me enough, you're not doing great, huh?"* "Sick," she mutters, half-smiling. *"I brought you soup."* He goes to the kitchen and heats up the soup for her. Then he walks straight to the fridge, grabs a beer, and looks at her. *"Have you taken any meds?"* "Yup," she replies. "Good," he says, cracking open the can. *"Alright then, let's talk about something interesting. Maybe that'll make you forget you're sick for a while."* There is a pause, a comfortable silence.

Hudson places the hot soup bowl in her hands. *"You ever think about how weird relationships are? One day, everything feels perfect, and the next, it's toxic as hell."* Olivia nods slowly, *"Yeah. I've been there. The idea of*

love sounds beautiful until it starts draining you.” He chuckles softly, “Shit, that’s deep. But true.” She smiles faintly, “Freedom feels better, doesn’t it?” “Definitely,” Hudson replies, leaning back on the couch, “Though, sometimes... being alone hits hard too.” Olivia looks at the ceiling, “Yeah. But maybe we just need to learn how to be at peace with ourselves first.” Hudson doesn’t answer right away. Then he says quietly, “You’re smarter than you look, Oli.” She laughs weakly, “Thanks, idiot.” He smiles and says to himself, “We are all idiots.”

It is past 3:30 a.m., and Hazel sits at her desk, the light from her study lamp falling over the living room. That night, something different catches her eye, a paragraph written in his sharp, uneven handwriting: *“I felt the greatness and presence of God. I was standing in the times of Satya Yuga. The world must one day witness this sacred place: **Ahobilam.**”*

Hazel freezes. Her eyes widen as she traces the words with her finger. Satya Yuga? Ahobilam? *“Wait, Tirumala is in Kali Yuga and Ahobilam in Satya Yuga.”* She whispers the names like secrets. The next line speaks of Vishnu’s most powerful avatar, Narasimha, the half-lion, half-human deity who destroyed evil to protect dharma. A chill runs through her spine. *“What are you trying to tell me, Poppy?”* she murmurs, flipping through the next few pages filled with faded ink sketches of mountains, caves, and temple-like structures. Without thinking, she grabs her laptop, types *“Ahobilam”* into the search bar. The images that

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appeared left her speechless: dense forests, ancient temples carved into hills. She rubbed her eyes, her heart racing, and whispered to herself, “*He actually went there...*”

The clock ticks 3:40 a.m., but Hazel doesn’t care. She is wide awake, caught between curiosity and awe. She can’t stop thinking about it. The name Vishnu keeps echoing in her head. She opens a new tab and types, ‘*Who is Vishnu?*’ Her AI reads the answer aloud in its calm digital voice: “*Vishnu is one of the principal deities in Hinduism, known as the preserver and protector of the universe. In the Bhagavad Gita, a sacred text of Dharma, Vishnu in the form of Krishna declares himself as God, the eternal being who sustains all creation.*” Hazel blinks, surprised. “*Wait... declares himself as God?*” she whispers. She leans closer to the screen, scrolling. “*What’s Dharma then?*” she asks as her curiosity deepens. The AI responds instantly: “*Dharma means the right way, the path of truth, duty, and righteousness.*” Hazel sits back, the words linger in her mind. “*The right way...*” she repeats softly. “*Interesting.*” She closes her laptop, locks her phone, and stretches her legs onto the desk. Leaning back in her chair, she gazes at the ceiling, lost in thought, about Gods, time, and the strange link between her Poppy’s words and what she has just learned.

Suddenly, she opens her eyes, pulls her legs back, unlocks her phone, and searches for the timelines of Yugas in Hinduism. She learns about the complete cycle called Maha Yuga and feels amazed. A faint

smile appears on her face as her eyelids grow heavy. Within minutes, she drifts off to sleep.

In the dimly lit hall, Olivia is asleep on the couch, wrapped in a blanket. Hudson sits nearby, slouched on the floor, his head resting against the edge of the sofa. After a while, his head tilts to the side, and he suddenly jerks awake with the sensation of falling. “*Shit*,” he mutters under his breath, rubbing his eyes. He stands up, stretches his arms, and heads to the washroom to splash some water on his face. As he walks back through the hallway, he notices a faint glow coming from the bedroom. The table lamp is still on. Curious, he peeks in quietly through the half-open door. Hazel is asleep in her chair, her legs resting on the desk, and an old journal lay open beside her, its pages filled with faded notes and sketches. Hudson raises his brows and rubs his eyes with his thumb and index finger. “*She’s crazy*,” he whispers playfully to himself. Then, steps in quietly, he leans forward and turns off the table lamp.

He returns to the living room, picks up his jacket, and glances once at Olivia, still sleeping soundly. He gently rearranges the blanket around her. Pulling out his phone, he types a message: “*Leaving, buddy. I’m heading back to my place. Had a great stay with you, hope you feel better.*” He slips the phone back into his pocket, smiles faintly, and steps out into the cool early morning air.

Liam stays connected with the group through their WhatsApp chat.

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The four of them named it *The Fantastic 4*, a name Olivia came up with during one of their late-night talks.

Next evening, Liam texts:

Liam: *"Hey guys. Mom's still not doing well. Dad's worried too. I've been running between the hospital and home since morning. Honestly... I'm exhausted. I'll see you next week, hopefully."*

The chat goes silent for a moment. Then Hazel replies.

Hazel: *"Take your time, Liam. Stay strong, buddy."*

Hudson: *"Take care, man."*

Olivia (finally feels better after days of being sick): *"Sending hugs, Liam. Don't worry about anything. Just take care of your mom, okay?"*

He sends a small heart emoji in reply. He doesn't say much after that; the group know what that silence meant. Over the next few days, the chat stayed alive. Olivia shares random memes, Hazel drops photos of her morning coffee, and Hudson reacting to their memes. It is their small way of keeping the group together, to make sure Liam doesn't feel alone, even miles away.

One evening at the library, Hazel sits behind the counter, entering records and checking returns. The door chimes softly. She looks up and notices a familiar face, Naraayan, the young man from the Indian restaurant. He looks surprised too. *"Hey... you're one of the butter chicken girls, right?"* he says with a grin. Hazel laughed softly, *"And you're the one who made us*

wait forever for naan,” she teases. Naraayan chuckles and walks closer to the counter, “Guilty. I didn’t know you work here.” “Part-time,” she replied, tapping her keyboard. “Helps me stay close to books.” He nods, glancing around. “Nice place. Way quieter than our kitchen.” There is a small pause before she asks, “So, where are you from, Naraayan? I mean which part of India?” “South,” he says. “Tamil Nadu. I grew up around Chennai.”

Her eyes light up a little. “South India... then maybe you know something about Ahobilam?” He looks thoughtful, shaking his head, “Ahobilam? Not really. What is it?” “Oh, you don’t? My bad. It’s an ancient place with temples of Narasimha.” “I’ve never been there,” he says. Then, after a moment, he adds, “But I’ve been to Tirumala six times. It’s one of the most divine places I’ve ever visited.” She leans forward, intrigued. “Tirumala is popular, but this one is more ancient than Tirumala. Oh wait... that’s connected to Vishnu too, right?” “Yeah,” he says, smiling faintly. “Lord Venkateswara, is an incarnation of Vishnu. People say it’s the heart of faith in our region. My mom still wakes up before sunrise just to chant his name.” She smiles softly, but there is a flicker of disappointment in her eyes. “I really wanted to know more about Ahobilam. My Poppy wrote about it in his book... It’s been stuck in my head since then. But it’s too much to understand. Too many avatars.”

Naraayan searches the place on the web. “You know, I might be able to help. One of my close friends is from the

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Kurnool region in Andhra Pradesh. That's near Ahobilam, I think. He might know about the place." Hazel's eyes brighten again, "Really?" "Yeah," he says with a reassuring smile. "I can ask him for details. Maybe he'll share pictures or stories. I'll text him tonight." "Thank you, Naraayan," she says genuinely. He smiles back, "No problem." They exchange numbers. Her eyes look happy.

That night, Hazel calls her grandmother once again. She asks her about her grandfather, "*Why he went to India, what he found there, and what truly fascinated him.*" Mrs. Elizabeth pauses for a moment, her voice soft and distant. She repeats what she has said before, "*He was deeply drawn to astronomical science, often studying sculptures and ancient carvings for hours in silence. He locked himself in his study room, surrounded by maps, books, and sketches of constellations.*"

After the call, curiosity consumes Hazel. She turned to her AI and typed, "*How is astronomical science related to Hinduism?*" The answer she received left her stunned, revealing how ancient temples of India are aligned with celestial constellations, how Gods are connected to cosmic energies, and how astronomy guides rituals, architecture, and even human destiny. "*It's confusing... How did they know all this?*" she murmurs to herself.

A couple of days later, Liam finally meets his friends after a long gap. The moment he sees them, his face lights up, and he admits how much he misses their

presence and laughter. As the group settles in, Liam mentions that he recently met a girl, his childhood friend, who is now pursuing postgraduate training in paediatrics. The others instantly start teasing him, “*Just friends!*” he responds looking into their eyes.

He turns to Hazel and thanks her for being there when he needs support. Hazel smiles and begins telling him about the new place she is researching, Naraayan, the man she met at the library, and her recent conversation with her grandmother. Olivia listens intently, her curiosity clearly intrigued, occasionally nodding or asking small questions. Hudson, on the other hand, seems disconnected from the conversation. He sits back in his chair, scrolling through Instagram reels, occasionally chuckling at something on his screen, a quiet escape from the deep talks around him.

A little later, he locks his phone and looks around the room. The laughter, the old warmth, the sense of belonging is all there, but somehow distant. He smiles faintly and says, “*You all sound like a bunch of professors now. What happened to movie nights and bad jokes?*” Everyone laughs. Hazel throws a wooden fork at him playfully. “*Maybe we’re growing up,*” she says. “*Or growing old,*” Hudson replies with a grin, though deep inside, he isn’t sure which one is true.

Olivia smiles, “*Alright, let’s go to a movie this weekend.*” “*There’s my buddy! Finally, someone’s talking sense,*” Hudson responds. Liam looks at him, “*Or maybe... a short trip?*” Hudson grins, “*Wow, that sounds even more*

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cool. “*I’m in,*” Olivia says. Hudson mock gasps, “*Oh my God! Is this actually happening? I’m there too, no backing out this time.*” Hazel says, “*Hello... without me, what are you all going to do?*” “*Without you? Way more fun, sweetie,*” Hudson teases. Hazel narrows her eyes, grips her coffee mug tightly, and raises it like she’s about to throw it at him. Hudson raises his hands. “*Calm down, calm down! I’m kidding!*” He half-laughs, “*Fuuu....! Oh, sorry.*” Liam claps, “*Great control. You’re really holding those F-words back!*” “*I know, right?*” Hudson says. “*We can still live peacefully.*” Olivia grins. “*Oooh... you still on that bet?*” Hudson leans back smugly. “*Yep, one year without a bad word, one year rent-free.*” Liam raises an eyebrow, “*That’s right.*” Olivia laughs, “*Wow, you’re actually doing great. None of us thought this would work!*” Hazel sips her coffee. “*Yeah, I gave you two weeks, tops.*” Hudson points at her with a playful glare. “*That’s the problem, no faith in me. I’m reformed now, people. A saint in progress.*” Liam teases, “*A saint who still scrolls Instagram reels during deep conversations.*” “*Hey,*” Hudson says, “*Enlightenment comes in different forms.*” The group laughs again.

Hazel’s phone starts to buzz on the table. She picks it up, noticing the name Naraayan.

Hazel (answers): “*Hey, Naraayan! What’s up?*”

Naraayan: “*Hi. I spoke to Hari. He’s actually been there. I told him about you and your research. He said he’ll give you a call sometime soon.*”

Hazel: “*That’s amazing! Thank you so much, Naraayan.*”

Naraayan: *"No problem. But he's a bit old-school."*

Hazel: *"No problem at all. I can't wait to talk to him. Thanks again!"*

She hangs up, smiling, her mind already racing. The group looks at her curiously. Olivia raises an eyebrow, "So?" Hazel grins, *"He said I'll get a call from someone named Harry. Apparently, he's from the same region."* Liam smiles, *"Looks like your research is levelling up."* Hudson smirks, *"Or she's about to join a cult."* Hazel playfully throws a paper towel at him, *"Oh, shut up!"* The others laugh, but Hazel can't hide her excitement.

The next morning, sunlight slips through the blinds of Hazel's apartment. She sits cross-legged on her bed, scrolling through an article. Minutes later, Olivia wakes up. Hazel is still glued to her laptop, eyes shining with determination. *"Good morning, Haz,"* Olivia says. Hazel looks at her, *"I want to visit India."* Olivia blinks, unsure if she heard that right. *"What? Visit India? Are you out of your mind?"* *"No, I'm serious."* *"Haz, that'll cost more than anything, flights, hotels, everything. And I've heard that place isn't exactly... clean. Dust, chaos, cows on the roads..."* Hazel cuts her off with a playful smirk, *"Oh really? You think our place is clean and hygienic? Look outside, trash cans overflowing, graffiti everywhere."* Olivia can't help but laugh, *"Okay, fair. But how are you even planning to go alone?"* Hazel leans back confidently, *"Who said alone? You're coming with me."* Olivia stares at her, *"Are you kidding me?"* *"Nope. And I'll pull Hudson and Liam along too."* Olivia throws her hands up, *"This is madness."* *"We'll think about the*

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money,” Hazel says. Olivia shakes her head, but deep down, she’s already warming up to the idea.

Their group chat, *The Fantastic 4* starts to buzz late in the evening.

Olivia: “Guys, Haz is planning a trip to India.”

Liam: “Alone?”

Hazel: “All of us.”

Hudson: “Tell me you’re kidding.”

Olivia: “She’s not.”

Liam sends a thinking emoji.

Hazel(responding to Liam): “What’s there to think about?”

Liam: “Sweetheart, not gonna happen.”

Hudson: “Yeah, sounds crazy.”

Olivia sends a sad face.

Hudson (responding to Olivia): “Wait, what? You actually wanna go too?”

Olivia: “Of course. Just thinking about the money.”

Liam: “Same here. But... maybe we can figure it out if we plan it right.”

Hudson(responding to Liam): “What the hell, man! You were against it two minutes ago. It’s not LA.”

Liam: “Yeah, but the idea of all of us being in India? Sounds right somehow.”

Hazel: “Exactly! Come on, guys...”

Hudson: “You and your mysterious journal...”

Olivia: “Let her have this one, Hudson. Feels like something we all need.”

Liam: “Alright, fine. I’m in, but we should talk money and logistics.”

Hazel: “Deal. I’ll handle the planning part.”

Hudson: “*This is insane... but screw it, I’m in too.*”

Olivia: “*Yay!*”

Days later, one evening, Hudson is excited about his date with Clara. He hugs Olivia at the supermarket and leaves early. After her shift, Olivia walks alone down the narrow street, her backpack hanging loosely from one shoulder. “*HELP ME...*” someone holds her hand. Olivia freezes.

A girl, maybe fourteen, stands behind her, her hair is messy, her eyes wide, hands shaking. Olivia bends slightly, confused. “*What? What happened...*” Before she can finish, she feels a strong hand, grip her shoulder from behind. A deep voice, low, speaks close to her ear. “*Sorry, my bad. She’s my niece. She’s not well.*” The man is in his forties, bald, with a short, thick beard and tired eyes that doesn’t match his polite tone. He smiles faintly, but his fingers dig into her shoulder with pressure. He begins walking fast, pulling the girl with him.

The girl’s eyes meet Olivia’s, a silent scream inside them, wet with fear. Something is wrong. Her chest tightens and her heart starts racing. “*Wait, what’s happening?*” she says to herself. Her hand moves towards her phone in her pocket, quick but trembling. Before she can pull it out, the man suddenly turns from behind. His eyes no longer pretend. They are sharp, wild. He slaps his hand over her mouth and hisses, “*DON’T.*”

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He yanks her backwards towards his van parked just around the corner. The metal door slides open, and the faint, frightened faces of kids look out. Six of them, boys and girls, silent, terrified, huddled in corners. He shoves her inside. Her back hits the seat. The smell of fuel and sweat fills her nose. “*Who were you calling, huh?*” he barks, grabbing her T-shirt tight. Her throat tightens, her breath shallow. She shakes her head rapidly. “*No, no, no.*” He reaches into her pocket, pulling out her phone, trying to unlock it. She is terrified, her pulse hammers.

Then instinct. Her body reacts before her mind. With all her strength, she swings her elbow back - CRACK! It hits his ear hard. He screams in pain, stumbles, and falls halfway out of the van, clutching his ear. The kids gasp, “*Run! Run! Run!*” one of them shouts, with trembling voice. She doesn’t think twice. She kicks the van door open, her legs shaking. Her shoes come off as he lunges to grab her, her feet slapping against the cold pavement. The children jump out too, stumbling, screaming. They run towards the main road, heading the light. Her phone is gone. She runs barefoot down the asphalt, lungs burning, until she sees headlights. She screams, waving her arms. “*Help! Call the police!*” Within minutes, sirens echo down the street. The van is gone. With someone’s help, she gets her phone back. She calls her friends.

Two hours later, her phone buzzes. A message from an officer: Suspect in custody.

Name: Jeremy Hayes, 41.

He is pulled over for reckless driving. They find a gun with no license. They find materials used for kidnapping. That night, Olivia is all over the news: *“Local woman rescues kidnapped children.”* But she doesn’t watch it. She sits alone on her bed, arms wrapped around her knees, still hearing the man’s voice in her head, still feeling his grip on her shoulder. She receives calls from the victims’ parents and guardians. They want to thank her, but she doesn’t pick up.

For three nights, she couldn’t sleep. Every sound outside her window makes her heart race. Hazel is there for her, staying with her at night, cooking, sitting beside her. Just silence and warmth. Her parents call her every day to check on her. They are proud of her, but also worried about her mental state. Her dad suggests to come home for a while, but she quietly replies, *“I just want to go somewhere far away from here for some time.”* Her dad responds gently, *“Anything you want, just let me know.”* Olivia pauses for a moment, then says softly, *“I will, Dad.”*

The phone vibrates in Hazel’s hand. She glances at the screen. An unknown U.S. number.

Hazel (answering the call): *“Hello.”*

Hari: *“Hey, it’s Hari... Narayan’s friend.”*

She presses the phone closer to her ear, not wanting to disturb her friend.

Hazel: *“Hey, Harry... listen, I’m happy to talk to you later, but now’s not a good time. I’m... taking care of my friend. Can we meet sometime?”*

There is a pause.

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Hari: *"But I recently came to India. I'll be back in New York after three months."*

Her lips part, but nothing comes out. Her eyes blink rapidly, searching for words.

Hazel: *"Oh..."*

Hari: *"Alright. Let me know whenever you're free. We can discuss."*

She nods, though he can't see it.

Hazel: *"Thanks for understanding, Harry. I'll give you a call... and I'm sorry."*

Hari: *"That's alright."*

Click.

The line goes dead. She lowers the phone slowly.

It has been a month. Olivia is slowly recovering from the incident. Jeremy is in jail, but the fear doesn't leave that fast. One evening, Olivia and Liam sit by a lake as the sunlight fades over the water. Hudson and Hazel stand by the railing a little farther away, talking softly. Olivia whispers, *"I want to get out of this place... just for a few days."* Liam looks at her, notices the emptiness behind her eyes, and nods. *"No arguments,"* he says softly, *"We'll make it happen."*

Hudson and Hazel continue their talk by the railing. *"I wanna tell you something, Haz,"* Hudson says quietly. *"Shoot,"* she replies, still watching the lake. *"I feel guilty that I wasn't there that night,"* he admits. *"Look at her... she's terrified."* She turns to him sharply. *"Shut up, will you?"* *"Yeah, she's terrified, that's evident. But why are you feeling this way? I'm just saying..."* *"In that case, we all should feel guilty,"* Hazel interrupts.

"Including her parents. No one could've known what would happen." Hudson sighs. *"Now get that thought out of your brainless head, idiot,"* she says, half serious, half teasing. He raises his hands in surrender. *"Alright, alright. But we gotta do something."* She nods slowly, her eyes still on Olivia.

As they continue talking, Clara arrives at the lakeside. Hudson spots her and raises his hand in a wave. *"Hey,"* she says with a warm smile as she walks towards them. *"Hey, Clara,"* Hazel says, smiling back. Clara's eyes then shift towards Olivia and Liam, who are sitting quietly on a bench by the lake. She walks over to them and softly says, *"Hey... how are you doing?"* Olivia looks up, managing a faint smile. *"I'm doing okay, thanks."* Before Clara can say more, Hudson and Hazel join them. Clara turns back to Hudson, brushing her hair aside. *"Sweety, I'm travelling to the Netherlands for a conference,"* she says. Hudson asks, *"Oh? When and how long?"* She smiles, adjusting her hair. *"In two days. It's a three-day conference, but I'll stay there for a week overall."* Hudson sighs playfully. *"Oh, I'll miss you."* *"Yeah, me too,"* she replies, *"But I can't miss this opportunity."* Liam, noticing the light moment, adds, *"So, Hudson... since Clara's leaving, how about a small get-together at our place tomorrow night?"*

Hudson looks at Liam for a second and understands what he means. This isn't just a gathering party, it's a way to lift up Olivia's mood. Without hesitation, he nods. *"Yeah, that's a great idea."* Hazel claps her hands. *"Yeyyy!"* She cheers. Olivia, for the first time in weeks,

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smiles softly.

The party night has that perfect warmth, lights dim, hard rock music, bass, and laughter filling the room. Liam and Hudson set everything up, beers stacked, snacks open, the smell of food filling the air. A knock comes at the door. “*We’re here, guys!*” Hazel calls out. Hudson swings the door open with a grin, “*Heyyyy, welcome to the party!*” He hugs Olivia and Hazel. Hazel looks around, “*Where’s she?*” “*Not here yet,*” Hudson replies, glancing at his watch. “*She’ll be here any minute.*”

Right on cue, the doorbell rings again. Clara steps in with her new roommate, **June**, loud, funny, and full of energy. “*Woohoooo!*” Everyone cheers. The music plays. June cracks crazy jokes that have everyone clutching their stomachs in laughter. Even Olivia, who hasn’t laughed properly in weeks, has tears in her eyes from giggling too much. Hazel, curious as ever, leans towards Clara. “*So... how did you and Hudson start dating?*” Hudson nearly chokes on his drink. “*Oh no, not that story.*” Clara laughs, glancing at Liam, “*Pavement story!*” “*Yeah, that’s the one.*” Liam bursts out laughing. “*Oh god, you two!*” The room roars with laughter. For a few hours, they dance and talk.

Later, Clara tugs Hudson aside near the kitchen counter. “*You did a good thing,*” she says softly. Hudson blinks, “*What? I didn’t get you.*” “*Arranging this get-together... for Olivia,*” she whispers. He pauses, lowering his eyes, “*I just... I didn’t want her to feel*

alone. I'm sorry if it felt like I used the moment or..." She cuts him off gently, *"No, baby. You and Liam are so caring."* Hudson's eyes well up slightly. He turns to Liam in the corner, watching him with beer in hand, chatting and laughing with June and Olivia.

For a moment, the room looked peaceful. *"Wanna know the truth?"* Clara whispers again. He looks at her, puzzled. *"What truth?"* *"I'm not going anywhere,"* she says, smiling. *"I'll attend the conference virtually."* Hudson freezes for a moment, then exhales with a trembling laugh. Her words hit him harder than he expected, reminding him how much he needs her right now. He sets his beer down on the table behind her, his hand brushing her waist. His other hand rises slowly to her neck, the chill of his palm sending a shiver through her. Their eyes meet - silence, closeness. He looks at her lips, then leans in for a soft, slow kiss.

From across the hall, June notices the romance, plays *'Perfect'* by Ed Sheeran. Turning up the volume, she calls out, *"Guys, this song is for you!"* The rest of the gang watches, exchanging soft smiles as the music drifts through the room. *"Awwwww....,"* they say together, clearly charmed by the moment. Clara and Hudson pull apart, cheeks red, smiling like teenagers. Olivia raises her beer with a small smile, *"To Hudson and Clara!"* Everyone echoes, *"Hudson and Clara!"* But Clara stops them, *"No, no, no."* People look surprised, including her boyfriend. She raises her beer, *"To Olivia, the real-life hero."* Everyone cheers and shouts in unison, *"To Olivia!"*

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She laughs through her tears, overwhelmed. One by one, they all come closer, Liam, Hazel, June, Hudson, Clara, wrapping her in a tight, warm group hug. Later, after the party, everyone leaves, but the couple sits near the window and talks for hours.

Days slowly return to normal. Hazel, now back in her quiet routine, sits at her desk late in the evening and types a message to Hari, “*Hey, hope you are doing well. I’m ready to talk whenever you are free.*” She hits send and sighs, knowing it is already past midnight in India.

Meanwhile, Olivia resumes her job. She earns respect; everyone greets her with pride. It feels good to stay busy again, surrounded by familiar faces, having normal conversations, and no news cameras or nightmares. Hudson, always watchful, keeps a subtle eye on her, making sure she smiles at least once every day. Liam, on the other hand, can’t stop thinking about June. Her laughter and her carefree energy stays with him. He opens her chat window twice, types, “*Hey June, what’s up*” ... and deletes it each time. Finally, he locks his phone and shakes his head, to himself, “*I can’t*”.

The next morning, Hazel’s phone buzzes. A message from Hari: “*Good morning, Hazel. I’ll call you in sometime.*” Hazel places her phone on the kitchen table and turns towards the stove. Olivia stands beside her, slicing vegetables with quiet focus. A few minutes later, the phone buzzes again. Hazel wipes her hands and picks it up.

Hazel: "*Hey, Harry.*"

Hari (a laugh echoes through the speaker): "*It's Hari, not Harry Potter.*"

Hazel (smirks): "*Yeah, Harry,*" she says, trying again."

Hari (chuckles): "*Better. Anyway, good time to talk?*"

Hazel: "*Yeah, absolutely. I really appreciate you taking the time,*" says warmly.

Hari: "*No problem.*"

Hazel (leaning against the counter): "*So apparently, I've been studying my great-great-grandpa's journal and found something about Ahobilam. It's... honestly fascinating.*"

Hari: "*Yeah...*" he begins, but Hazel keeps going.

Hazel: "*I did some research online. The place looks incredible.*"

Olivia glances at her, curious, her hands still busy on the chopping board.

There is silence for a moment.

Hazel: "*Hello? You still there?*"

Hari: "*Yeah, I'm listening.*"

Hazel: "*So tell me, have you been there?*"

Hari: "*Yes, once. When I was a teen. But I think it's underrated.*"

Hazel tilts her head.

Hazel: "*Good that you've been there. But why do you think it's underrated?*"

Hari: "*Because, the place felt... untouched. Many people don't know its divinity yet, but the vibe is awesome.*"

Hazel: "*Wait, what do you mean by vibe? That's exactly what I want to understand.*"

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Hari exhales deeply, choosing his words.

Hari: *“Okay, listen. When you visit an ancient temple, a real ancient one, you can feel something. The air changes. When you touch the stone pillars, there’s this coldness, this peace... like the place remembers something older than time. You want to hug the pillar, meditate there, breathe there. It feels as if gods and humans once walked together. That... is the vibe.”*

Hazel and Olivia look at each other, jaws slightly open.

Hazel: *“Oh my god,”* she whispers. Then, hesitantly, *“Just don’t think otherwise, but... do you really think it’s true? Does God exist?”*

Hari (thoughtfully): *“There are two kinds of people in the world.”*

Olivia interrupts: *“Don’t say good and bad...”*

He pauses before answering, his tone reflective.

Hari (chuckling softly): *“No, not that. I’m talking about logic. There are two kinds, people who believe what they see, and people who believe what they feel.”*

“So we have to feel it when it’s a matter of belief. Like in our culture, we feel nature as God. Mountains, trees, air, rivers, rocks, animals, fire, all are sacred. Because creation itself is divine.”

Hazel (eyes widen): *“You worship nature?”*

Hari: *“Yes, we worship all five elements as gods. say, Earth as **Bhoo-devi**, Fire as **Agni-dev**, Water as **Varuna-dev**, wind as **Vayu-dev** & for space that is cosmic space consciousness we pray to **Lord Shiva**.”*

Olivia (feeling amazed): “Wow...”

Hari: “*We even worship Cows as Gau-maata and plants as Tulasi ma.*”

Hazel (smirks playfully): “*Then how come you eat meat? Don’t mind me asking.*”

Hari (laughs): “*That’s okay. Valid question. It’s part of evolution. Thousands of years ago, only Kshatriyas, the warriors, ate meat to stay strong and to protect the land. But after centuries of invasions, the Sultanates, Nizams, and British forced changes in lifestyle. What began as a necessity became a habit. And for meat sellers, it has become a business.*”

Hazel (murmuring thoughtfully): “*Oh... probably.*”

Hari: “*Exactly, It’s all a part of the change.*”

There is a moment of silence. Hazel takes a deep breath.

Hazel: “*So the reason I asked you about the vibe... is my poppy wrote something like ‘He felt god in Ahobilam’ in his journal.*”

Hari (sounds intrigued): “*That’s insane. Was he there? When?*”

Hazel (immediately): “*1870s.*”

Hari: “*And you still have his book? That’s incredible.*”

Hazel: “*Yeah, I found it in our garage back home in Auckland, been carrying it ever since.*”

Hari (asks in surprise): “*Wait, you’re from New Zealand?*” “*Interesting. I think it was under Maori civilization during the 1800s?*”

Hazel (laughs softly): “*What? Wait, let me check that with my grandmother.*”

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Hazel: *“Anyway, It’s really great connecting with you, Hari, knowing all this about your culture... It’s beautiful. Can we talk again?”*

Hari: *“Of course. But, I’m travelling tomorrow morning to Goa. It’s a short trip with my graduation friends. If I lose signal, text me. I’ll call when I can.”*

Hazel: *“Yeah, sure. Enjoy your trip. Thanks again, Hari.”*

Hari (warmly): *“Bye”*

The line clicks.

Hazel stands quietly for a moment, the phone still in her hand. Olivia leans on the counter, watching her. Hazel finally smiles, *“He’s good.”* Olivia nods softly, the knife still in her hand, *“That part about the five elements... it actually blew my mind.”* Hazel smiles faintly, *“Yeah... right.”*

That afternoon, Hazel steps out through the university’s main door, the wind brushes her hair as she takes out her phone. She dials her grandmother.

Hazel: *“Grandma, was your grandfather really from New Zealand?”*

There is a pause on the other end, a soft rustle before Mrs. Elizabeth speaks.

Elizabeth: *“No, dear. He migrated from Britain, like many others, back then. The British travelled and settled in new lands; that’s how they occupied countries.”*

Hazel (stops walking): *“Why did no one ever tell me about this?”*

Mrs. Elizabeth only sighs, the line fading into silence.

Later, Hazel sits on a bench outside the library and opens WhatsApp.

Hazel: *“Oli, looks like Hari was right. My great-great-grandparents migrated from Britain to NZ.”*

Across town, Olivia’s phone buzzes. She picks it up, reads the message, and replies.

Olivia: *“Damn these British,”* she mutters, shaking her head.

That evening, Liam’s phone vibrates while he is on his way to the library.

June: *“Hey Liam, it’s June.”*

He freezes for a second, staring at the notification on his lock screen. A smile creeps onto his face even before he opens the message. He waits a moment to act casual, then taps it open.

Liam: *“Hi, Mate... I thought of calling you after the party, but I got kind of occupied.”*

June: *“That’s not a problem. What’s up?”*

Liam: *“Just heading to the library. I realized I didn’t hear you properly when you said what you’re pursuing at the party.”*

June: *“Bad listener. I’m not gonna say it again.”*

Liam: *“Oh! The music was loud!”*

June: *“Oh yeah? Then why did you nod when I said?”*

Liam pauses, and types.

Liam: *“Okay, let me think then.”*

June: *“That’s the punishment.”*

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After a long pause, he finally sends.

Liam: “*Chemistry?*”

June: “*Alright. Survived.*”

Liam: “*Jesus. I’m sweating.*”

June: “*Haha! Good. Keeps your brain active.*”

He can’t help but laugh quietly as he walks through the gate.

By the time it hits 9:00 p.m., the apartment lights are dim. Hazel sits cross-legged on the couch, a slice hanging from her hand. Olivia leans against the window, a can of Coke in one hand, her phone lighting up. A notification blinks, her old flame. She stares at it for a second, then blocks the number without thinking. She takes a bite of pizza, barely chewing, her eyes fixed on the dark city outside.

“*Sometimes,*” she says suddenly, her voice low, “*I feel like love these days has lost all meaning. It’s more attraction, less connection.*” Hazel looks up, chewing thoughtfully. “*You’re not wrong. Everyone wants to be wanted, but no one wants to be understood. There’s a big difference there.*” Olivia gives a half-laugh, shaking her head. “*Exactly.*” “*Yeah,*” Hazel says, setting her plate down. “*You know, content these days on OTT platforms makes intimacy look like a fashion trend. Sex everywhere, but no one talks about the other stuff.*”

Olivia sighs, her eyes softening. “*When I was younger, I thought love had to be messy, fights, beautiful, breakups,*

makeups. But now I get it... Real love is quiet. It's someone who lets you be." Hazel smiles a little, *"That's true. People are scared of that kind of love now. It needs effort, patience, and honesty. That's too slow for this generation. It's easier to swipe than to stay."* "Facts," Olivia says, tossing her crust back into the box. *"Even sex feels like fast food now. No one wants to cook; everyone wants delivery."* Hazel tilts her head, laughing. *"Haha... all I see is distraction. Scrolling, dating apps, hookups, everyone's trying to fill a void."* Olivia looks over, a smile tugging at her lips. *"Damn. Do you think love can still survive in this chaos?"* Hazel leans back, thinking for a moment, *"Yeah. I'm at around 20% yes."* Olivia smirks. *"I choose pizza over people."* Hazel laughs, *"Hell yeah."* They both crack up.

A few minutes later, Olivia leans her head back, eyes half-closed. *"You know,"* she says softly, *"Talks like this... they feel good. Real."* Hazel smiles, *"Yeah."*

The next morning, Hazel's phone buzzes.
Mr. Anderson flashes on the screen.

Anderson: *"Good morning, dear. How's my girl doing?"*
Hazel smiles faintly. *"She's better now, Mr. Anderson. Recovering well."*

Anderson: *"That's good to hear."* He pauses, then adds softly, *"Is there anything you need? Any help from my side?"*

Hazel (hesitates for a second): *"Actually, Oli mentioned she wants to travel somewhere far for a while... to clear her mind."*

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Anderson: *“She mentioned that with me as well. Does she have anywhere in mind?”*

Hazel: *“Um... no.”* (Takes a breath) *“I’ve been thinking. I want to take her to India. But honestly, I’m not sure how we’ll manage it with the money we have.”*

There is silence for a moment on the line. Then he asks, a bit puzzled.

Anderson: *“India? Why India, dear? There are so many other places you could visit.”*

Hazel (smiling to herself): *“Well, I’m reading my Poppy’s journal, and there’s this one place in the southern part of India he writes about. It fascinates me. I think... maybe Oli would like it too.”*

Anderson (chuckles softly): *“That does sound adventurous. But don’t you think it’s a bit risky, two women travelling that far?”*

Hazel (quickly replies): *“Oh, we won’t be alone. Liam and Hudson will join us.”*

Anderson: *“Ah, that’s great.”* He pauses, and she hears him thinking on the other end.

Hazel (with a soft voice): *“Actually, it’s a little selfish. Going to India is my idea. I just think... maybe Oli could use it too. But I don’t want to push it on her.”*

Anderson (with a soft voice): *“No, dear, don’t say that. Most international leaders went to India before they became successful. They even say that they found their purpose there. You’re not wasting money or running away from problems. Travelling for peace, that’s a good thing. And I trust you all completely.”*

Hazel: (with relief): *“Thank you, Mr. Anderson.”*

Anderson (smiles faintly): "Alright, dear. Give me some time. I'll figure something out and get back to you."

Hazel: "Thank you Mr. Anderson."

Anderson: "You're welcome, dear."

The call disconnects.

Out of pure excitement, Hazel immediately calls Liam.

He picks up on the second ring.

Liam: "Hi Mate, what's up?"

Hazel: "Dude... you're not gonna believe this," she says, her voice bubbling. "I just spoke to Oli's dad. He's going to help us financially for the trip!"

Liam (sits up straight): "Wait, seriously? That's huge!"

Hazel (laughs): "Yeah. But here's the thing, I don't want him to carry the financial burden alone. We should figure out a way to clear the debt later."

Liam (thinks for a moment): "That's fair. We can plan it properly and set a time frame to pay him back. Hudson and I can chip in too."

Hazel (walks as she talks): "Exactly what I was thinking. Let's pool whatever savings we have. We'll create one travel account and use it for everything."

Liam: "Perfect. I'll talk to Hudson. And stop walking, I can't see you properly, your video is shaking."

Within minutes, Hudson joins the conference call.

Hudson (almost shouting in excitement): "You guys are serious? We're actually doing this?"

Hazel (laughs): "Yes! We're going to India next month! Woohoo!"

Hudson (whistles): "Shit, that's amazing. Oli's gonna be

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so happy. Alright, I'll send my part soon."

Liam (nods): *"Deal. We'll use the account for tickets, bookings, everything. Once Mr. Anderson sends his share, we'll already be set."*

By afternoon, Hazel's phone buzzes again, it's Mr. Anderson calling.

Anderson: *"Hello dear,"* he says kindly. *"I did some checking around, and I can lend you a certain amount for the trip. Hope it helps."*

She feels a mix of gratitude and guilt.

Hazel: *"That's incredibly kind, Mr. Anderson. I promise we'll pay you back once we settle everything. Maybe within a few months."*

Anderson (chuckles softly): *"It's alright, dear. You don't have to rush. Just make sure you all have fun and take care of my daughter, okay?"*

Hazel (smiles warmly): *"Always. You can count on that."*

When she hangs up, she jumps once, twice and thrice out of excitement. She immediately texts Hudson and Liam separately to surprise Olivia.

Hazel: *"Money's sorted."*

Hudson: *"Amazing! Adventure time!"*

Liam: *"Let's make it count."*

Around 8:00 p.m., Liam sits on his bed, laptop open,

spreadsheets and travel estimates scattered across the screen. His face looks focused and anxious. After a deep sigh, he grabs his phone and dials his father's number.

Mr. Edward (on call): *"Hey, son! Been a while since you called me at this hour. Is everything okay?"*

Liam (chuckles softly): *"Yeah, everything's fine, Dad. Just... needed to talk to you about something."*

Edward: *"That sounds serious already. What's going on?"*

Liam: *"So, you remember my friend Oli?"*

Edward: *"Yes, I remember. That sweet girl who went through that horrible incident. How's she holding up?"*

Liam: *"She's better now. Still recovering. But Hazel planned something for her, a trip to India. More like a healing journey, I guess. And I'm going with them... along with Hudson."*

Edward: *"India? That's quite far, son. Sounds exciting though."*

Liam (nervous chuckle): *"Yeah, it is. But... the thing is, the budget's tight. Hazel's covering most of the expenses with Oli's dad's help, but it still falls short for all four of us. I was wondering if you could help me with the rest. I promise I'll pay you once I'm back."*

There's a brief silence on the line.

Edward: *"How much are we talking about?"*

Liam: *"Around three thousand dollars. I did the math twice."*

After a pause, his father speaks.

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Edward: *“Liam, you don’t need to pay me back.”*

Liam: *“No, Dad. I don’t want to take it for granted. I’ll...”*

Edward (interrupts): *“Listen to me. You’ve always been sensible. If you’re spending money on something meaningful, not gambling, not wasting it, then I’m proud to support that. Travel changes people, especially when it’s for the right reasons.”*

Liam (smiles faintly): *“Thanks, Dad. I didn’t expect you to say that.”*

Edward: *“Also... take care of your friends. Especially her. She’s been through enough.”*

Liam: *“That’s the plan. Thanks, Dad. Really.”*

Edward: *“You’re my son. That’s all the reason I need.”*

Liam sits silently for a moment, staring at the numbers on his laptop. Then he smiles to himself and whispers, *“Alright...”*

Hudson is on a FaceTime call with Clara.

Hudson: *“Babe, it’s official. We’re going to India next month.”*

Her face lights up as soon as she hears the news. For a moment, Clara just stares, smiling, though her eyes carry a faint sadness.

Clara: *“That’s amazing, baby... I’m so happy for you. But I’m gonna miss you.”*

Hudson leans closer to the camera, his tone softening.

Hudson: *“It’s just a twenty-day trip. I’ll be in touch*

every single day, promise. You'll get sick of my calls before I'm back."

Clara laughs quietly, brushing her hair aside.

Clara: *"I'll hold you to that."*

Just then, June, who is sitting nearby, overhears and cheers.

June: *"Great news, guys... have fun!"*

Hudson: *"Yup. Thanks, buddy."*

June claps her hands together.

June: *"By the way, what's Liam doing? Haven't heard from him."*

Hudson shrugs, smiling.

Hudson: *"He's in his room. I'll tell him to ping you."*

June raises an eyebrow playfully.

June: *"You better."*

The next evening, Liam and Hudson head to Hazel's apartment. The soft strumming of James Blunt's *'You're Beautiful'* floats from the Bluetooth speaker. Olivia sits by the window with a brush in hand, gently painting a small terracotta pot.

Suddenly, the door bursts open. Hazel, Hudson, and Liam shout in unison, *"SURPRISE!"* Olivia nearly drops her brush. *"What? What is happening?"* she stammers, her eyes darting between them. Hazel, grinning ear to ear, announces, *"Officially confirmed, we're going to India next month!"* Olivia freezes mid-breath. *"What? How? Money?"* she asks, stunned. Hazel walks over, her face glowing with excitement.

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“Your dad’s helping us, and Liam’s dad too, almost eighty percent of the finances. Don’t worry, we’ll pay them back.” Olivia’s eyes widened. *“My dad?”* Liam nods, smiling warmly, *“Yeah. He really cares about you, Oli.”* Hudson adds, leaning against the doorframe, *“He called Hazel every day, to check how you were doing.”* For a moment, Olivia says nothing. Her eyes shimmer with shock and emotion. Then a slow smile spreads across her face, *“Guess I need to start packing then.”* **“YEAHH!”** the three shout in unison.

Later, she calls her dad, and they talk for a long hours, about her childhood, her sister, and all the little mischief they once created together. Before hanging up, she thanks him from the bottom of her heart. He pauses for a moment, then says *“I’m proud of you, dear.”* She smiles. The next evening, at Hazel’s apartment, Hazel sits with her laptop open, scrolling through flight options while sipping coffee. She checks the time difference on her phone, it’s afternoon in India.

She opens WhatsApp and types.

Hazel: *“Hey Hari, we’re planning to come to India next month. Do you think you can help us find a guide for a proper tour?”*

She hits send and leans back. Within minutes, her phone buzzes.

Hari: *“Wait, seriously?”*

Hazel: *“Yeah, three other friends and I.”*

Hari: *"That's awesome! Let me know your dates, and I'll plan something for you guys. Maybe even show you around myself if I'm free."*

Hazel: *"No way, that would be amazing. Thanks, buddy. I'll keep you posted."*

Hari: *"Cool. Welcome to India in advance."*

Hazel: *"Haha, thanks. Feels good already."*

A few days pass.

Hazel and Olivia stroll through a busy shopping street, bags in hand, comparing outfits and laughing at each other's choices. While scanning through scarves, Hazel's phone buzzes.

Hari: *"Hey."*

Hazel smiles slightly and types back.

Hazel: *"Hi Hari, what's up?"*

A moment later....

Hari: *"Just an update, one of my close friends, his sister, is planning to visit Ahobilam too with her colleagues."*

Hazel pauses. Unexpected, she thinks, but interesting.

Hazel: *"Oh, is it?"*

Hari: *"Yeah. It's coincidental. I hope you don't mind if we all travel together?"*

Hazel looks at Olivia.

Hazel: *"No, it's alright. We'll have company, what more do we want?"*

Hari: *"That's great. Thank you. So, all set to travel?"*

Hazel laughs softly, juggling shopping bags.

Hazel: *"Still shopping! But yes, we'll see you this Friday. Yeyy."*

Hari: *"Great. Safe travels."*

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Hazel locks her phone, excitement settling in.

On travel day, at the guys apartment. Hudson stands by the bed. Clara clings to him, her eyes already wet. He wraps his arms around her and lifts her slightly off the ground in a tight, lingering hug.

Clara (voice trembling), *"I'm gonna miss you. A lot"*
Hudson cups her face gently, his thumbs brushing the edges of her cheeks. Their breaths mingle, soft, warm, nervous. For a moment, they just stand there, foreheads pressed together, eyes closed, holding onto the quiet stillness between them. Her fingers curl around his collar, as if afraid he might disappear the second she lets go. Slowly, very slowly, he leans in. Their lips meet, delicate at first. A breath shared. Then another. The kiss grows warmer, lingering, memorizing the feel of each other. She rises on her toes slightly, holding him closer. His hand moves to the back of her head, fingers threading gently through her hair, protecting the moment. They break for a second just enough to breathe. She looks at him, eyes glistening, a tiny nervous laugh escaping because she doesn't want to cry. He kisses her again, brief and tender.

When they finally part, neither speaks for a moment. He brushes the tip of her nose lightly with his thumb, and she closes her eyes, grounding herself in the touch. She squeezes his hand one last time before letting go, her fingers slipping away slowly. Kissing her forehead softly, he whispers, *"Be good and text me... a lot."* She nods, holding his shirt for one more second before

letting go.

In the other bedroom, June stands a few steps away, suitcase beside her. Liam walks up, nervous but trying to look cool. “*Take care of yourself, okay?*” she says, staring at him. He doesn’t answer. Instead, he pulls her into a warm hug, breathing her in, burying his face in her shoulder, inhaling her shampoo, her warmth. She feels his quiet intensity and pulls back slightly, then sees it. His eyes, turning faintly red, had a soft glow behind them. Her breath catches. June softly says, “*Liam...*” He blinks, forcing normalcy, offering a crooked smile. “*I... uh... I... like you.*” June’s heart races. She reaches out, gently touching his arm, and smiles, “*I know... I like you too. We’ll talk more when you come back, okay?*” He nods, swallowing the emotion rising in his throat. They lean in, foreheads meeting softly, sharing a quiet moment only the two of them understand. They both knew they were in love, but he’s just too shy to express. June holds herself back, not wanting to make things heavy, especially now, just before he travels.

Hazel’s Bedroom, She closes her luggage and carefully slips the journal inside. She whispers to the journal, “*Wish me luck, Poppy.*” Olivia bursts in, bright like the morning sun “*Ready to get lost in a totally new country?*” Hazel laughs and hugs her tight. “*Totally... Let’s go!*” They pull their bags behind them.

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John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK)

At the airport, the two cabs arrive at the same time. Both the couples step out of one. Hazel and Olivia step out of the other. They spot each other. A moment of stunned joy, then chaos. A perfect group hug. Hazel and Olivia squeal. Hudson lifts Olivia playfully. Liam ruffles Hazel's hair. Clara, teases Hudson, "*Try not to fall off a mountain, okay?*" He laughs, "*Yes, ma'am.*" June turns to Liam, quietly, with a hint of pain, "*Call me when you land.*" He nods. Clara and June wave one last time, as they walk away.

The four of them turn towards the airport security, bags rolling behind them. Olivia, excited, "*I'm so happy!!*" Hudson pumps his fist, "*Damn! Haz really made us do this...*" They stride forward.

To be continued...



The Americans on their way to India.

WHAT LIES BEYOND!

02 **THE INDIANS**

Hyderabad, India

Time: 7:00 a.m.

The alarm rings. **Tara** slowly opens her eyes as sunlight filters softly through the curtains. She stretches a little, blinking away sleep. Tara is tall, calm-natured, and works as a software developer at a multinational company. She lives with her loving family, her father, who works in a private firm; her mother, a homemaker who also runs a small business from home; and her elder brother, a pilot. They stay together in a peaceful gated community.

She gets out of bed, brushes her teeth, washes her face, and steps into the dining room, still rubbing her sleepy eyes. She looks around for her mother and spots her in the kitchen, “*Good morning, Amma!*” Her mom responds, “*Good morning, kanna. Get ready, I’m making dosas.*” Tara asks curiously, “*Chutney?*” “*Your favorite, peanut chutney,*” she responds. Tara, “*Ah! Thanks baby.*”

She hugs her mother and walks into the hall. Opening the main door, she picks up the newspaper and settles on the sofa, scanning the headlines. Ten minutes later, her dad steps out of his room after a bath. He glances at her, then at the wall clock, and walks straight into the pooja room. Tara thinks for a second. “*Oh no, it’s getting late,*” she says to herself.

Rushes to take a bath, humming along to the song

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‘APT.’ Moments later, she changes her clothes into a red & black checkered shirt and a pair of denim jeans moving with a quiet urgency. She sits down for breakfast. Her dad finishes his prayer and joins her at the table. After breakfast, she slips her laptop into her backpack and grabs her helmet. “*Bye Amma, bye Nanna...*” says loudly. Her mom adjusts the backpack strap and says, “*Behave like a girl, careful.*” Her dad smiles, “*Bye ra.*” She heads downstairs, glances at her wristwatch, and settles onto her bike. Pressing the start button, she hears the engine come alive. It’s 8:20 a.m. and she says to herself, “*Let’s go.*”

She rides a Royal Enfield motorbike, Cherry, as she lovingly names it. She usually leaves a little early, just enough time to catch up with her colleague, Kathy, at the cafeteria before work begins. It’s a routine she looks forward to every day.

Somewhere in the middle of the city, a packed colony stretches along a narrow road, lined with men’s hostels on both sides. Two-stored buildings sit tightly together like stacked matchboxes. Next to a small Hanuman temple stands one of these hostels, a plain white building with a narrow staircase clinging to its left side. On the second floor, the third room’s door rests half open. Inside, **David** is still asleep, snoring softly, while the rest of his roommates have already rushed out for work.

David is a quiet, less-confident young man from a village in Andhra Pradesh, working as a software test

engineer. His family lives back in his hometown, Chirala. His mother is a homemaker who leads a silent life; his father works as an attendant in a government school. His uncle, a strict and temperamental man with local panchayat contacts, frequently visits their home. The family is socially isolated, having cut ties with most relatives long ago. David once performed decently in academics, not because he understood the concept, but because he memorized answers. He knows very little beyond textbooks, and though he secures his job through a referral, his performance worsens year by year due to his lack of depth and confidence.

Now living in a city hostel and commuting by public bus, mornings feel like a battle he is never ready for. The alarm keeps screaming. 8:20 a.m. flashes on the clock. He turns to his side, scratches his head, and forces his eyes open.

David (groggy), “*Damn... already 8:20?*” He stretches lazily, sits up, and reaches for a cigarette lying beside him. Lighting it, he inhales slowly and stares blankly at the ceiling, lost in nothingness. After a few minutes, he finally gets up and wanders towards the bathroom. By 9:30 a.m., he finishes brushing and bathing, still slow, still dragging, still uninterested. He works in the same firm as Tara and Kathy, but in a different team. He picks up his bag, locks the door, and strolls towards the bus stop, his feet heavy, as if he’s walking through mud. He mutters, “*Another boring day... I hope it rains or something.*”

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On the road, Tara is driving. It's a 20-minute ride to the office. She turns the handle slightly to the left and switches off the indicator and parks the bike. Her hair flutters through the small gap under her helmet. She walks straight towards the cafeteria on the 12th floor. As she enters, she spots Kathy sitting alone at a corner table. A soft smile appears on Tara's face. She walks up quietly and gently taps Kathy on the shoulder from behind.

Kathy - Kathyayani, is a software developer. Unlike Tara, she doesn't come from a financially settled background. She carries a cloud of negativity around her and shows very little interest in most things, except partying. What draws her close to Tara is her warmth and selfless nature. Tara treats everyone with kindness and never judges, a quality Kathy silently admires more than she admits.

She doesn't care much about her family or responsibilities. Spends her salary on food, parties, and late-night outings, often getting into trouble at clubs, at work, and even in public. On the outside, she acts carefree and rebellious, but quietly, she feels hurt and helpless, like she's drifting without direction. Her mother is a yoga teacher who devotes herself to traditional yogic practices and spirituality, teaching children in the neighbourhood about discipline and inner peace. But Kathy rejects all of it. She doesn't believe in ancient practices, God, or rituals. To her, they are comforting stories, good for others, meaningless to her. Her father works as a doctor in

another state and visits home once a month. The long stretches of silence and emotional distance have shaped her. She grows up feeling isolated, unseen, and disconnected, a quiet loneliness she now carries everywhere.

Tara, “*Morning... babe.*” Kathy turns around with a smile. “*Hey!!*” Tara notices the half-empty coffee cup in front of her. She walks to the machine, fills one for herself, and sits across from Kathy, studying her expression gently. Tara, “*How’s the project going?*” Kathy sighs, “*Going on...*” Tara, “*Good...*” Kathy stretches her arms, “*Except my dumbass manager. What does he want? He pinpoints every little thing.*” Tara asks, “*What now?*” Kathy responds, “*Not interested. Let’s talk about something else.*” Tara observes her closely, “*Why are your eyes red?*” Kathy hides a smile, “*Didn’t sleep last night.*” Tara understands immediately, “*Idiot.*” Kathy smirks, “*Well... he’s hot.*” Tara with concern, “*You keep meeting random strangers like this..*” She stops as Kathy waves her hand, “*Okay, okay, don’t start now.*” She finishes the last sip of her coffee and stands up with a reassuring smile. Tara nods, “*Fine. Did you see Nethra?*” Kathy, “*Nope.*”

Minutes later, the girls walk out of the cafeteria, chatting lightly as they approach their cabins. On the way, they spot Ayub walking towards them. He is their senior. During a team party, he proposed to Kathy, and she clearly told him she didn’t have feelings for him and asked him not to take it personally. As Ayub walks past without speaking but staring, Tara leans slightly to

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Kathy and whispers, *“I’ll drop you in the evening.”* *“Sure, if you let me drive,”* Kathy replies. Soon, they part ways and head to their respective workstations.

Around 11:30 a.m., David sits at his desk, staring blankly at his screen. The test cases in front of him feel overwhelming, and he keeps scrolling without focus. Suddenly, his laptop buzzes, a Teams call from his Team Lead, Raghav. He adjusts his headset and answers.

Raghav (in a firm tone): *“David, can you step into the meeting room? The manager wants to discuss something.”*

David (his stomach tightens): *“Oh... okay. Coming.”*

He walks in the direction of the glass meeting room, shoulders slightly slumped. Inside, Raghav and his manager, Priya, are already seated. Priya gestures for him to sit. *“David, we reviewed the last sprint results. There are critical bugs missed in the module you tested. This isn’t the first time, and it’s starting to affect delivery timelines.”* She closes her laptop firmly. He shifts uncomfortably, struggling to meet her eyes. *“Ma’am... I tried. I thought I covered everything.”* *“Trying isn’t enough in testing, David. Attention to detail is the key. We need improvement, immediately,”* she says, looking straight at him.

Raghav folds his arms and adds, *“To help you, we’re assigning Nethra to shadow your work. She’ll review your test cases and monitor your progress closely this sprint.”*

Just then, Nethra steps into the room, holding her laptop. She looks calm, professional, and slightly concerned. “*Nethra, you’ll work closely with David and make sure he follows the right approach. Help him strengthen his basics,*” Priya instructs. “*Sure, ma’am.*” Nethra replies.

David nods, trying not to look embarrassed. “*Okay... I’ll do better.*” Priya stands up. “*Good. We want you to succeed. But you need to put in the effort as well.*” The meeting ends.

David walks out slowly, feeling the weight of disappointment but also a pressure he can no longer ignore. Nethra gives him a small, polite smile before heading back to her desk. He exhales, places his laptop on his table, and decides to step out for a five-minute smoke break. As he presses the elevator button, he thinks to himself, “*Monitoring me? This is going to be a tough day.*”

Nethra is the only daughter of a Kannada father and a Telugu mother. Her parents married for love, and she was born into a close-knit family. Her father recently moved to Australia on a project, so she lives with her mother and grandparents. Her mother works as an Accounts Manager in a private company in the city. Nethra is deeply rooted in her culture and strongly believes in the stories and traditions passed down by her grandmother.

During lunch, Tara and Kathy sit together in the

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cafeteria, quietly eating. Tara looks up from her plate and says casually, “*Shall we go to a movie tomorrow?*” Kathy forces a small smile, “*Yeah, sure.*” She pokes at her food, pretending to be fine, while Tara continues chatting cheerfully about which movie to watch.

The girls have a WhatsApp group called ‘*Weee.*’ Tara drops a message.

Tara: “*Nethra... movie tomorrow?*”

Nethra: “*Sorry, babes. I can’t. I have a pooja at home. You both carry on... and miss me.*”

Kathy: “*Wru?*”

Nethra: “*On my way to the cafeteria.*”

Tara: “*We’ll wait for you.*”

“*I’ll book the tickets for both of us then.*” Tara says. “*Okay, cool,*” Kathy replies casually. A moment later, Kathy adds, “*Every time... what pooja does she do. Such a maniac. I don’t get it.*” Tara stares at her, “*Chup! If you don’t believe it, then be yourself. Don’t judge.*” Her tone sharpens slightly, “*What I’m saying is, if you don’t believe in God, that’s fine. No one’s forcing you, so don’t question others.*”

As they finish their lunch, Nethra walks into the cafeteria with her teammates. She notices them and walks over with a gentle smile. “*Hey,*” she greets. Both look up and smile. “*Hey! Hottie!*” they say in unison, clearly happy to see her. Nethra tells her colleagues she’ll join them later. As they walk away, she pulls out a chair and sits beside them. “*Am I looking like an engineer or a teacher?*” Tara tilts her head, “*What’s up!*”

Nethra sighs, *"Priya gave me a task to shadow David's work. Ridiculous."*

Kathy raises an eyebrow. *"Oh... handsome?"* she winks. Tara immediately snaps, *"Chup!"* Kathy laughs. *"Haha, kidding..."* Nethra shrugs, *"Looks so-so. Boring guy. The problem is... what about my tasks?"* Tara nods, *"Yeah."* *"I just spoke to him,"* Nethra adds softly. *"He barely responds. God!"* Kathy leans back, *"Honestly, it's doable. Make friends with him first."* *"Yeah,"* Tara agrees. *"That makes sense."* *"Alright, I'll try,"* Nethra sighs. *"So, what's new?"* Kathy smirks. *"I wanted to go to a club and dance. This idiot is taking me to a movie."* Nethra laughs. *"I'm ready for clubbing next weekend,"* Tara nods. *"Alright, alright. Count me in. God, you guys are spoiled."* They laugh.

Next day, they sit in a packed theatre, watching a thriller. The screen is intense, the audience silent. But Kathy, however, is holding back irritation as she notices the guy sitting next to her trying to 'accidentally' brush his hand against hers. She leans towards Tara and mutters, *"Disgusting. I swear I'll go to jail today."* Tara smirks. *"Do whatever you want. Just don't tell me."* The man tries again. That's it. Kathy snaps her head towards him and shouts in quick motion, loud and sharp, **"WHAT?!"** The man jerks back. He screams **"AAAAHHH!"**

He spills his drink as the entire row turns to stare. Tara bends forward, trying not to burst out laughing, hiding her face in her scarf.

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Outside the theatre, they walk to the parking lot. Kathy starts the bike. After riding for a while, they stop at a roadside tea stall and sit quietly with their cups. “*You scared the whole row,*” Tara says, laughing. “*Two rows,*” Kathy corrects. They sip their tea. “*I’m not interested in all this drama,*” Kathy says quietly. “*Then what interests you?*” Tara asks. “*Drinks. Dancing. Dating.*” she responds. Tara raises an eyebrow. “*What a clarity madam!*” She shrugs lightly. “*Well! You know me.*” “*What exactly do you do in dating?*” Tara asks, curious. “*Drinks and dancing for sure... and if I like the guy, I’ll...*” Kathy trails off. “*You can understand.*” Tara’s eyes widen. “*Are you serious?*” Kathy looks straight at her. “*Hello, not with everyone. Only when a few things match... like the previous guy,*” she blushes slightly.

She shifts in her seat, adjusting her jeans, clearly uncomfortable. Tara studies her face. “*You okay?*” Kathy exhales, “*Period cramps.*” “*I have painkillers,*” She offers instantly. “*Yeah, that’d help,*” Kathy says, taking the tablet from her. Tara looks up at the sky. “*Nice climate.*” “*Interesting conversation too,*” Kathy replies.

They both laugh, then glance towards the nearby bus stop and freeze. A man is yelling at a woman, standing far too close and cornering her aggressively. The woman trembles, tears spilling down her face as she fumbles for her phone. He snatches it from her hand. “*Who are you calling? The police? Or your boyfriend?*” he talks, each word sharp with rage.

The woman collapses into sobs of frustration. Then, without warning, the man grabs her by the neck and slaps her hard. She stumbles back, terrified. People nearby stare, rooted to the spot. Some begin recording the scene on their phones. One man clears his throat and steps forward, his voice small. *“Hey!!... Leave her. What are you doing? Should I call the police?”* The man turns on him, eyes blazing. *“Brother, this is personal,”* he snaps. *“Call the police and you’ll be dragged into this too. I dare you.”* The man hesitates... then steps back, unwilling to get involved.

Tara’s expression hardens. Fury flashes in her eyes. *“What an idiot,”* she mutters and moves before anyone can stop her. She grabs a wooden rod from the tea stall, long and worn with age, and strides straight towards him. He doesn’t notice her until it’s too late. The first strike lands on his knee. The second crashes down on his fingers. He howls in pain, collapsing onto the dusty ground, clutching his leg and cursing. Tara steps back calmly, pulls out her phone, and snaps a quick photo of him. Then she turns to the trembling woman. *“Come on. Now.”*

Kathy has already started the bike. Within seconds, Tara and the shaken woman climb on, and they speed away, cutting through traffic, passing two signals before finally slowing down.

Safe for the moment, Tara calls the woman’s parents and calmly explains what happened, reassuring them that their daughter is safe. Her voice is steady, careful

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not to alarm them while still making the situation clear. At the same time, Kathy calls Nethra and briefly explains the incident. Nethra quickly connects her with her aunt from the She-Team Police Department, and Kathy gives a short, firm account of what happened so the matter is at least on their radar.

Standing beside them, the woman finally manages to speak. “*I’m Supriya,*” she says softly. Then, after a small pause, she adds with hesitation, “*I don’t want to ruin his life.*” Both the women look at each other and looks at her steadily, understanding the fear behind those words. “*Are you kidding?*” “*Yeah, you’re right,*” she says gently. “*You don’t have to ruin anyone’s life. But if you don’t stop this now... one day he might come back with something worse. An acid bottle. A knife. See, we’ll help you handle this the right way.*” Kathy folds her arms and adds more bluntly, “*And you need to learn how to fight back.*” Supriya takes a deep breath, slowly regaining her composure. “*Okay,*” she accepts quietly. “*Thank you.*”

After a few minutes of arranging calls and offering quiet reassurances, they exchange numbers and prepare to leave. Supriya walks towards the bus stop, while Tara and Kathy ride off, their hearts still racing, yet warmed by the small satisfaction of knowing they had done the right thing.

The next day at the office, during a tea break, Tara stands near the corridor chatting with Vishnu, one of her teammates. Her phone buzzes.

Kathy: “*Waiting for you. Only two spoons left :-D*”

Tara: “*Coming in 5 min!*”

About five minutes later, she walks into the cafeteria and spots Kathy finishing a snack. “*Not working?*” Tara asks, settling into the chair beside her. “*Didn’t eat anything in the morning?*” Kathy grins and shrugs. “*I did. Don’t know why I’m hungry again. And I’m not in the mood to work. Will you stay?*” Tara sighs. “*No, babe. We have a meeting in the next hour. I’ll join later.*” “*Okay,*” Kathy says, leaning back. “*I’ll pass the time.*” “*What are you gonna do?*” Tara asks. “*In the middle of an article,*” Kathy replies, already pulling out her phone. “*You carry on,*” she pats Tara’s arm. “*Okay, see you then.*” She leaves. Kathy stays seated, sipping water from her bottle. Legs stretched out, one foot resting on the empty chair opposite her. The soft glow of her laptop reflects in her tired eyes as she types, brows slightly furrowed, absorbed in finishing the article she started earlier.

About twenty minutes later, she hits Post, removes her glasses, and rubs her eyes. With a slow exhale, she stretches her arms and neck, letting out a quiet groan. Then she looks around. The cafeteria hums with low chatter and clinking cups, the usual midday rhythm settling in as she takes another sip of water, briefly lost in thought.

Later that afternoon, Nethra walks to David’s desk with a notebook in her hand. He sits there with earphones on, staring at his monitor as if working.

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“David,” she calls. He doesn’t respond, or pretends not to. She taps the desk. David pulls out one earphone, “Haa?” “*I asked you to finish the regression list before lunch. Why haven’t you started?*” she asks calmly. David shrugs, “*I am... checking mails.*” She glances at his screen; YouTube is minimized in the corner. “*You weren’t checking mails. And you know it.*” “*I, I’ll do it later,*” he mutters, turning back to the screen.

Nethra stiffens, “*David, you’re supposed to listen. Follow instructions. You missed three bugs yesterday. If you continue like this, even your extension...*” He snaps, frustration boiling over. “*Don’t lecture me. I know what I’m doing.*” She freezes, taken aback by his tone. “*If you knew what you were doing, the manager wouldn’t have assigned me to help you.*” He falls silent, breathing hard. His eyes show irritation, but also confusion, like he isn’t sure who he’s angry at. Her. Himself. Life.

Nethra inhales deeply, steadying herself. “*I’m trying to help you. But if you keep behaving like this, I’ll have no choice but to report it.*” She turns and walks away.

Manager’s Cabin, Nethra walks briskly towards Priya’s desk, frustration weighing heavily on her chest. Priya looks up with a warm smile. “*Hey, Nethra. Is everything okay?*” Nethra pauses. She suddenly is not angry, just drained. Let me give it another try, she thinks. “*Actually... nothing urgent,*” she says quietly. “*I’ll handle it.*” Priya nods warmly. Nethra returns to the bay and stops beside his desk. He looks up, expecting another scolding.

Instead, she pulls a chair and sits next to him. *“David... listen,”* she says softly. *“If something’s bothering you, try to put it aside and focus.”* He avoids her gaze, jaw clenched, as if protecting something fragile inside him. *“Let’s try again,”* she says gently. *“As teammates.”* She extends her hand. David hesitates, then shakes it. His voice is low and unsure. *“I don’t know what I’m doing most days.”* She nods. *“Then we’ll figure it out. Together. But you have to listen, okay?”* A long pause follows.

He nods slowly, *“Alright.”* She gives a faint smile, *“Good. We’ll start with the regression sheet. And... let’s have coffee together in the evening.”* He exhales, half in relief, half in anxiety, and opens his laptop properly this time.

The next day, Office Lobby - Afternoon Break. Tara and Kathy lounge on a sofa, chatting lazily. Nethra walks in with David beside her. He looks like he wishes the floor would swallow him whole. Nethra smiles, trying to ease the tension. *“Guys... this is David.”* Tara smiles warmly. Kathy raises a casual hand. *“Hi,”* Tara says. *“Hey,”* Kathy adds. He nods stiffly. *“Hello.”* They settle around the same table. A brief, awkward silence follows. He sits rigid, clearly uncomfortable being the only guy among them.

Tara scrolls through her phone and casually breaks the ice. *“So, David... watched any good movies lately? We were just talking about one.”* He shakes his head slowly. *“No. I don’t watch movies.”* Kathy tilts her head.

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"Okay... web series? Anything?" He stares blankly. *"No."* Tara and Kathy exchange a quick glance, confused but curious. Tara tries again, gently. *"Hmm... books, then? Do you read?"* *"No."* Kathy, amused now, leans forward. *"Games? I play a lot."* He shakes his head again. *"No."* Another pause.

Tara softens her voice. *"Okay... so what do you do in your free time?"* He looks down at the table, fingers fidgeting. *"Nothing."* Kathy blinks. *"Nothing nothing?"* After a moment, he adds quietly, *"I used to play cricket... but not now."* Nethra looks surprised, at least he's talking. Tara, still curious, asks, *"So... what do you during weekends?"* He hesitates. *"I go to church on Sundays."* Kathy rolls her eyes slightly. *"Okay... and apart from church?"* Awkward silence again.

Tara tries again, gently. *"Music? Travel?"* David finally looks up. His voice is low, and says *"We are not supposed to watch movies or TV. No distractions. Life should be served to our God."* The girls slowly exchange a stunned look. Nethra in her mind *"But i've seen him watching youtube content."* Kathy leans back, folds her arms, muttering under her breath, *"Another maniac."*

Kathy looks at Nethra with a playful smile that says *'Good luck, babe.'* Nethra clears her throat, trying to make him talk. *"Ever tried exploring? Just a little?"* He hesitates. Tara jumps in gently. *"It's okay. No pressure."* Kathy shrugs. *"We're probably too weird for you anyway."* He gives a faint, unsure nod. The girls exchange a quiet smile.

Tara suddenly brightens. “*By the way, tomorrow’s your birthday, right?*” Nethra smiles. “*Yeah. Nothing big. Morning temple, some rituals at home. I’ll be free by the evening... we can go to a cafe.*” She glances at David. “*You can join too.*” He hesitates, then nods awkwardly. “*Uh... yeah. Okay.*” Kathy smirks. “*What coffee? Are you 50? We will drink Naatu Saara.*” she looks at David “*I’ll teach you how to flirt with women.*” He opens his mouth. “*Not..*” “*I know, I know,*” she cuts him off with a grin, “*You’re not interested.*” She says to herself, ‘*I’ll not be surprised if he is gay.*’ He nods stiffly. Tara smiles warmly, trying to make him feel included. “*You’ll enjoy it.*” He looks away, nervous but trying. Tara leans toward Kathy and whispers, just loud enough, “*What cake are we getting?*” Kathy grins. “*Let’s mix vodka in a chocolate cake.*” Tara gasps. “*Chup!*”

The next day at the coffee shop, warm lights glow softly, and gentle music plays in the background. A cozy birthday setup surrounds them, cake at the center, tiny candles flickering. Nethra cuts the cake, her cheeks glowing with happiness. Tara and Kathy clap and cheer. David claps too, stiffly. They take pictures, laugh, and share bites of cake. After a moment, Nethra opens her sling bag and pulls out a small packet wrapped in a banana leaf. She smiles, excited. “*Prasadam from the temple. I thought I’d share it with you all.*” Tara smiles. “*Aww, thank you!*” Kathy grins. “*Sure, okay. Anything for you, babe!*” But David freezes. Quietly, hesitantly, he says, “*I... can’t eat it.*” Tara looks confused. “*Why?*” Kathy raises an eyebrow. “*You heard of prasadam or poison?*” Nethra’s smile

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Nethra's Birthday celebrations.

fades, hurt flickering in her eyes. *“Why not? What’s wrong?”* He shifts uncomfortably. *“We’re not supposed to eat prasadam from other religions. It’s... a belief thing. I’m sorry.”* Kathy lets out a short breath, half laugh, half disbelief. *“Dude, I don’t even believe in God, and I ate it. What’s the big deal?”* He remains silent. An awkward pause fills the air.

Nethra’s voice drops, hurt and edged with sarcasm. She puts the packet back into her bag. *“Great.”* She looks directly at him, eyes steady. *“Listen, if you had given me something from church, I’d take it without disrespect. I wouldn’t insult your culture or tradition.”* He lowers his head. His defensiveness fades into guilt. *“I’m sorry. Please... let’s not talk about it now.”* A quiet settles over the table.

Sensing the tension, Kathy jumps in. *“Okay. Cool. Let’s change the topic.”* She turns to Nethra. *“Did you see Max Amini’s new video? God, he’s hilarious.”* Slowly, laughter returns. They talk about memes and dance trends. Nethra smiles again.

Minutes later, they step out of the coffee shop. Kathy turns to them eagerly. *“Come on! Let’s go to the pub. Just two hours!”* Both the girls nod excitedly. David, feeling awkward, speaks firmly. *“I can’t come.”* Kathy smiles, relieved. *“That’s fine. Totally fine.”* The girls head in the opposite direction, where lively lights and music already glow in the distance. He walks away alone, feels left out. He wants to enjoy the moment, but something keeps pulling him back. Guilt rises in his

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chest for not accepting the prasadam. He scolds himself, *“What’s wrong with taking it, you idiot?” “Why did you hurt her on her birthday? Why couldn’t you just accept it? What is bothering you so much?”* His thoughts spiral. To himself, *“These women have such clarity in life. They’re trying to help me, being friendly, reaching out. So, why am I behaving like this? What’s stopping me from stepping out of the dark?”*

Pub Night, bass-heavy music thumps through the air. Neon lights flicker. A cozy corner table holds three drinks. Kathy is already tipsy, swaying slightly. Nethra and Tara sip slowly, controlled, enjoying *themselves*. Kathy raises her glass dramatically. *“To no one in particular, happy birthday to this hottest queen, Nethraaa!”* Nethra laughs. *“Thank you, madam drama.”* They clink glasses.

Minutes later, she is clearly drunk. Her head sways, hair messy, leaning forward over the table. Slurring, *“So... Daviiid...”* Nethra stiffens, annoyed. *“Here we go.”* She laughs loudly. *“No, seriously, what was that today? Can’t eat prasadam?”* She snorts. *“What is he... allergic to God?”* Nethra’s expression darkens. *“Shit yaar... I was trying to help him with his career, and he hurt me instead. It was disrespectful.”* Tara places a gentle hand on her arm. *“Shut up, he didn’t do it willingly. Maybe he’s brainwashed. Like... deeply. He doesn’t even realize what he’s doing.”* Kathy scoffs and sets her glass down with a soft thud. *“Brainwashed? There is no God at all! He says church, you say pooja... what is all this nonsense?”*

Nethra straightens, her eyes sharp now, voice firm and hurt. “*Mind your words.*” Kathy blinks, then laughs again, completely unaware of the tension. “*What? I’m just telling the truth. Doing good to people is God for me.*” She adds, waving her hand, “*I can’t accept anything unless I see something extraordinary.*” Tara steps in again, playing mediator, patting her back gently. “*Okay, madam, calm down. You’re loud.*” Kathy throws her hand in the air dramatically. “*Loud means honest!*” Nethra shakes her head and exhales, hurt but composed. “*You’ll change someday,*” she says quietly. “*I’ll look you in the eye and say it then.*” Kathy squints, trying to process the words. “*Will I? Will I really?*” she laughs. “*God save me then....oh wait....*” she bursts out laughing again. Tara laughs nervously. “*Stop it! The whole club is listening to you.*”

Their voices blend with the music, dramatic, emotional, messy. Nethra leans back, breathing out slowly. Kathy slumps onto Tara’s shoulder, giggling. Tara wraps an arm around both of them, shaking her head with a smile. The bouncers are already watching them, so Tara quietly steps in between, guiding both of them out of the club. They book a cab and head straight to Tara’s place to crash for the night.

Two weeks later, a sleek meeting room. The team sits around a long table, managers, team leads, and a few teammates. Tara stands at the front, laptop connected, slides ready. She looks composed and confident. Vani, in a firm tone, says, “*Let’s begin. Tara will walk us through the new microservice implementation.*” She

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Tara presenting a project.

begins, “*Good afternoon, everyone. Today I’ll be presenting the design and implementation of the User Notification Microservice, focusing on asynchronous message handling, optimized API response time, and fault-tolerant delivery.*” A slide appears on the screen, ‘*Architecture Overview*’. A clean diagram shows message queues, load balancers, and microservice nodes. The meeting continues for nearly ninety minutes.

Hussain, one of her teammates, asks, “*How do we handle message failures? Retries? Queue overflow?*” Tara clicks to the next slide, prepared. “*Yes. We’ve implemented a retry mechanism with exponential backoff. Failed messages move to a dead-letter queue, which is monitored and auto-cleaned every twenty-four hours. Manual override is available for priority cases.*” Hussain nods, satisfied. Vani asks, “*What about unit tests and deployment?*” Tara replies confidently, “*Eighty-five percentage coverage on core modules. The service is containerized and integrated with CI/CD. It auto-deploys to staging, and we’re ready to move to production after UAT sign-off.*” A brief silence follows.

Then, approving nods ripple around the table. Quiet pride glows on Tara’s face. Vani smiles. “*Alright, great work, Tara. Solid presentation.*” Light applause follows as the meeting wraps up. As everyone walks out, Nethra approaches her. “*How was the meeting?*” she asks. She smiles, slightly blushing, “*Kirraaaaak.*”

Days pass, David begins to change, not drastically, not

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dramatically, but enough to be noticed. He responds when spoken to. He listens. He even starts sharing small updates about his tasks. His typing grows steadier, focused. One morning, as usual, the office comes alive. Tara and Kathy grab tea. Nethra logs in, tying her hair into a ponytail, and opens Teams. Her eyes scan the list, and David is offline. She frowns slightly. Just then, a message pops up on her phone.

David: *"Hi Nethra. I am going to my hometown. My grandfather is unwell. Won't come today."*

She reads it twice.

Nethra (responds): *"Okay. I hope you dropped an email to the TL, looping the Manager and HR. Take care. Message me if you need anything."*

She locks her phone, sits back in her chair, and continues her work. Tara walks in with two cups of tea. *"Ta da... completed Emily in Paris,"* she says, placing one cup on Nethra's desk. Nethra looks at her excitedly. *"And?"* *"Crazy. I loved it,"* Tara responds. *"Told you,"* Nethra says. She sips her tea, asks, *"Where is he? Didn't come today?"* *"Yeah, went to his hometown. His grandpa is unwell,"* Nethra responds.

A couple of days pass. David returns to the office. He looks dull. His shoulders are slightly slumped, and he looks like someone hasn't slept well. Sits at his desk without greeting anyone and logs in silently.

Later that day, during a brief pause, Nethra walks up to him. Softly, *"How did it happen? Your grandfather?"*

He speaks quietly, almost whispering. *"Thatha! He had diabetes. It got bad. The doctors... They said it was too late. His organs were shutting down."* A pause. *"He didn't make it."* "Oh no... I'm so sorry," she responds. And asks, *"Was there any delay in treatment?"* His voice tightens, guilt creeping in. *"Yeah. He declined to go to the hospital at first. And then... when he finally agreed, my dad and uncle... they delayed it."* She looks confused, *"Why?"* *"My uncle took him to the pastor,"* he says. She struggles to understand. *"Why?"* His voice rises slightly, anger simmering beneath it. *"How do I explain this to you?"* *"They said that he could heal him. That prayer would fix everything. They said medicine was 'earthly'... and that Thatha just needed faith."* She stiffens, *"This is bad,"* he adds, *"When he collapsed, they rushed him in. But by then..."* (he swallows hard) *"The doctors said they could've saved him if he'd come in a few days earlier. Just days."*

A heavy silence settles between them. Nethra, in disbelief, *"I... I can't believe this. They let him suffer, thinking prayer alone would..."* He cuts in, his voice breaking. *"He was in pain, yaar. And they just... believed words could cure what medicine couldn't."* She stares at him, shaken. *"Are you crazy? Are you supporting this? Faith is powerful, yes... but this? This is blind faith."* He says coldly, *"It's what we do. We take the sick to the church father and let him speak to God for them. Just like you people go to the temple."* Nethra frowns, disbelief etched across her face. Without another word, she stands and walks towards the corridor. He follows, sensing what's coming.

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She stops and turns to him. “*Are you serious right now? You actually believe the church father is speaking to God? Like directly? Or through a phone?*” He answers quietly, “*Listen... My dad and uncle believe it. The pastor said he prayed for him particularly, and that’s why Thatha lived one more year. Otherwise, he would’ve died last year.*”

Nethra stands in shock, hearing his words. “*Oh, God! And you just accepted that? No questions?*” His expression hardens. “*I don’t like your tone, Nethra. There’s something off in the way you’re saying this. You always want to fight with me,*” he says, defensively.

The corridor stretches long and mostly empty, echoing with distant footsteps and muffled chatter from nearby meeting rooms. Nethra stays calm, but she is visibly disturbed. She shakes her head, “*Listen, when someone is sick, you take them to a doctor. Not a pastor.*” His posture stiffens, eyes narrowing. “*Your culture puts sindoor on foreheads and worships idols. What’s the difference?*” he asks.

Nethra steps forward immediately. “*The difference is, we still go to the hospital if someone’s sick.*” His voice rises, anger mixing with defensiveness. “*What are you trying to say?*” Nethra breathes slowly, steadying herself. “*I’m saying faith shouldn’t replace medicine, David. That’s all.*”

His jaw clenches. “*So you’re saying my family killed him.*” “*No,*” she replies firmly. “*I’m saying they chose*

the wrong solution. They loved him, I know that. But they still made a mistake." His eyes turn glossy again. He looks down, fists tightening at his sides. His voice cracks slightly. *"You think I don't know that?" "He wouldn't listen. What am I supposed to do?"* His voice breaks. *"I couldn't do anything."*

He stands there, cornered by his own thoughts. She steps closer, *"I'm not against your faith, David. Just don't let it happen to your family when they need medical help."* She turns and walks down the corridor, not looking back. Later that evening, Nethra pulls her phone from her back pocket, opens WhatsApp group, and starts typing.

Nethra: *"Guys... something happened today. I need to talk. David and I had a heated argument."*

Tara: *"What did you do?"*

Kathy: *"Is everything okay?"*

Nethra: *"Not really. He was talking about his grandpa... who passed away. It was really sad. But then he said his family took him to a pastor instead of a hospital. I couldn't stay silent. I... kind of questioned him about it. And it turned into something else."*

Tara: *"YOU questioned him?"*

Kathy: *"Oh no... how did it end?"*

Nethra: *"He got upset. I brought up a lot of things. I didn't mean to question him, but... it just came out. You know my temper."*

Tara: *"Nethra... kya kiya re. That's deeply personal stuff. He must have felt really cornered."*

Kathy: *"I don't even know what to say."*

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Tara: *“And you know him, he doesn’t open up easily. You definitely hit a nerve.”*

Nethra: *“I know. I’ve been thinking about it all evening. Should I talk to him?”*

Kathy: *“Definitely. Thoda gently, madam.”*

Tara: *“We’ll help, okay? If you want us to talk to him or come with you, just say the word.”*

Nethra: *“Okay... I’ll message him. Maybe tomorrow morning. Just want to make sure he’s okay.”*

Kathy: *“You’ve got this.”*

Tara: *“Yeah!”*

Nethra: *“Thanks, girls. Seriously.”*

The next day, David calls Nethra in the morning. Seeing his name on the screen, she feels a little relieved and answers. *“Hi. Sorry for hurting you with my words yesterday.”* He responds, *“It’s fine. I too have my doubts.”* There’s silence for a couple of seconds. *“Hey... shall we meet?”* he asks. Nethra immediately sends a message to the group.

Nethra: *“He’s fine. Wants to meet. Shall we come to your place, Tara?”*

Tara: *“Mom and Dad are going out. Let me ask them.”*

A couple of minutes later,

Tara: *“Dad said it’s fine. Let me know what time you guys will reach.”*

Kathy: *“I’ll be there by 10.”*

Nethra: *“Around 10.”*

Tara: *“Okay.”*

At Tara’s home, David and Nethra arrive at 10 a.m

sharp. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills the air. The space is cozy, with a few art pieces on the walls and an open window letting in the breeze. Tara walks in with three mugs of coffee and places them on the centre table. Kathy drops a message saying she'll be late. *"Okay, coffee is served. First thing, don't fight, otherwise, I'm giving a lecture. So behave,"* she winks and walks off toward the kitchen, deliberately giving them space.

David half-smiles. *"Thanks for agreeing to meet,"* she nods, *"Glad."* She picks up her coffee. *"I couldn't sleep much. I kept thinking about our conversation. I think I was too blunt and unfair."* He says quietly, *"You weren't wrong to ask questions. I just...wasn't ready for them. Not at that moment."*

Nethra nods slowly. *"Yeah... I realized that too late. I wasn't trying to question your faith. It's just... the whole thing felt so heavy. I couldn't process it."* He exhales softly. *"It is heavy."* They sip their coffee in silence. After a pause, he adds, *"You question a lot? huh?"* She laughs. *"My blood and brain boil when you do that."* He laughs, saying that. She looks at him. *"I mean, I have my doubts in my life already and you are pushing me off emotional cliffs."* She laughs, and says, *"Clarity is more important bro."*

Tara walks back in with a plate of pakoda and plops down on the couch. *"Alright,"* she says, *"Now that you've made peace, can we talk about how Kathy roasted that creepy guy near the lobby yesterday?"* She sits

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between them, a mischievous grin on her face, grabs a piece of pakoda, and leans forward. *“Okay, so get this,”* Tara begins. *“Kathy was sitting outside the lobby yesterday, waiting for her colleague. And this guy, you know, that HR who thinks he’s hot stuff?”* Nethra groans. *“Ugh, I know him.”* Tara laughs. *“So he walks up to her with his colleague and is about to say something like, ‘Hey... you look very beautiful today.’”* Nethra’s eyes widened. *“Then?”* David adds, confused, *“Maybe if I see him, I’ll know.”* Tara imitates Kathy’s calm voice. *“And Kathy, without missing a beat, goes, ‘Thank you, Anna.’”* Nethra bursts out laughing. David stares, shocked. *“Wow.”* Tara grins. *“Yup.”* Nethra adds, *“Honestly, she’s the deadliest of all.”* Tara laughs again. *“Poor guy just walked off, smiling awkwardly.”*

As they laugh when the door creaks open and Kathy steps in, holding a small bag and her phone. She looks at them curiously and sets her bag down. Kathy grins, *“Thank God, you all are laughing!”* David and Nethra together, *“Hi...”* Tara laughs. *“I was telling them about your lobby scene.”* Kathy rolls her eyes. *“Yeah! Poor guy.”*

David smiles. *“Man... it’s been forever since I laughed.”* Then he adds hesitantly, *“Hey... can I ask something? You three, you never had boyfriends? No love stories? Secret crushes?”* Tara raises a finger. *“Hold on, mister. Too many questions.”* Kathy lifts an eyebrow and plops into the armchair. *“Me? Nah. No interest in relationships after my college breakup. But I’ll watch rom-coms till 3 a.m.”* She sips her coffee and adds,

“Love on screen? Ten on ten.” Tara nods in agreement. “Same. I love reading and watching it, the longing looks, the heartbreak, the drama. But personally? Too much maintenance.” Nethra leans back. “Honestly, I find my neighbour interesting. He’s cool. We flirt with our eyes whenever we see each other... but I don’t know. Maybe I’m just not ready yet.”

A pause. Tara and Kathy jump in together, teasing her. “Oooooo... show us, show us!” David laughs at the scene. Then he asks, more thoughtfully, “How come you girls are so sure about yourselves? I mean... all of you seem to have clarity about life. You’re confident in the way you carry yourselves.”

The girls fall quiet for a moment. They sense something deep behind the question. His childhood clearly hasn’t been normal, and they don’t quite know how to answer. Nethra breaks the silence casually, but with a sharp undertone. “So... what about you? Any stories? Any crushes?”

David freezes for a split second, caught off guard. Kathy and Tara exchange a quick glance, their eyes meet, and an unspoken conversation passes between them. Here we go again. Tara leans slightly towards Kathy, whispering with a grin, “If she starts investigating, you jump out the right window. I’ll take the left.”

They both suppress a laugh. Kathy encourages him, “Come on, bro. You’ve got to have at least one story.”

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David smiles, then speaks honestly. *"I did... I had a partner. My college girlfriend, Minni."* He sighs. *"The initial days were amazing. She was sweet, beautiful... and she too is a Christian."* He smiles faintly. *"I used to surprise her by going to her church."* The girls lean forward, listening interestingly. He continues, *"Late-night calls, phone kisses, outings... you know the drill."*

A pause. *"But somewhere along the way, she started avoiding me. Our chats slowed down."* Tara softly, *"Oh... why?"* Kathy gently, *"So... what happened then?"*

He hesitates, uncomfortable, then sighs. *"It's personal."* Nethra quietly teasing him, *"Tell us, bro. It's in the past anyway."* He looks down for a moment. Then, taking a slow breath, he begins. *"Alright. I studied hard. Scored well. Got into college on merit. In the first year, I topped."* *"At the beginning of our second year, Minni came to me for help with studies. She asked politely, genuinely. So I said yes. We started spending time together, notes, library sessions, late-night study calls."* He pauses, then continues. *"But then... movies happened. We got closer physically and emotionally. Small distractions from books. The lines blurred."* He swallows. *"I didn't even realise how much I liked being around her until one day, my grades started slipping. I wasn't even surprised. She saw how bad I felt and hugged me. Said, 'You're more than just marks.'"* A faint smile crosses his face, edged with pain.

"And I believed her." They listen in silence. His voice grows quieter. *"But slowly... things changed. I started*

noticing her phone lighting up constantly. Late-night chats with people I don't know. I asked her, 'Why are you chatting so late with these guys?' She looked at me straight in the eye and said, "'It's my life. My choice.' My heart is broken. No explanations. No reassurance. Just... distance."

"I tried to hold on. I tried harder to make her feel secure, to understand her. But the more I tried, the faster she slipped away. We fought. All the time. Over everything. From text replies to where she sat in class. And one day, just like that... she said, 'I'm not interested in you anymore.' No anger. No guilt. Just... cold truth." A beat of silence.

"Later, I couldn't focus. Couldn't even breathe properly in class. Every bench, every song, every place on campus reminded me of her. I wanted her back so badly... I didn't know who I was without her." He looks up slowly at the three girls, silently listening. "I stopped going out. Didn't talk to anyone. I even stopped calling home. I sat for hours in church to relieve the pain. No use."

Tara says softly, *"Man, I knew something was pulling you."* He smiles faintly, tears in his eyes. Kathy nods. *"Yeah. It's good you shared this with us."* She gets up, hugs him gently. Says, *"It's okay. You're stronger than you think."* Nethra, curious, asks, *"You said you surprised her by going to her church. I didn't get that. She owns a church?"* Tara and Kathy look at each other in sudden shock. Their eyes meet, silently communicating. *"Oh... she's going somewhere,"* one of

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them mouths. *“Get ready to jump, babe,”* the other signals. He answers, *“No, not like that. She goes to one church, and I go to another.”* Nethra nods. *“Oh. Okay.”* Tara exhales in relief, glancing at Kathy. *“Thank God, she said okay.”*

His inner voice to himself, *‘This is the right time to tell them.’* He hesitates. His voice turns serious, slightly trembling. *“I want to tell you guys something important...”* Nethra leans forward, but Tara suddenly cuts in, changing the topic. *“Guys, you have to watch this movie...”* He swallows and decides not to say it. That evening, he sits apart from the group, close enough to see their faces lit by laughter. Something he hasn’t allowed himself to enjoy in a long time. He watches Tara correct a joke with a soft smile. Nethra listens with genuine attention. Kathy teases without malice. The small gestures, a hand on the shoulder, a shared look, feels unfamiliar. He notices them, and something inside him loosens.

He begins to think quietly, like someone examining a part of himself he has long avoided. *‘If I had taken the prasadam, what would have happened? Nothing. It’s just food. Not poison. Just a blessing. So why did I refuse? Why did I defend that rule like it was my entire life?’* His thoughts drift back, the prayers, the folded hands, the helpless nights beside his grandfather’s bed. *‘Am I protecting something I never even chose? Or am I protecting myself from change? When did obedience become a shield for fear?’* The questions pile up, sharp and relentless. *‘Why did I shame Nethra in front of*

everyone? Was I defending honor... or hiding fear? He looks at her now, patient, honest. And for the first time, he doesn't look away.

“What makes them laugh so easily? Is it courage? I want that. I want to be part of something that doesn't make me prove myself every minute. I want my mother to smile more. I want my father to be less tired. I want to be less afraid of them... less ashamed of them.” He realizes, with a small, surprised shock, that the change has to start with him. He tells himself, *“Okay. Start small.”* *“Tomorrow, say yes to tea. Hold the door when someone's hands are full. Ask one person how their day was, and listen and try not to react when you feel judged.”* Breathes. *“If that goes well, try the next level, eat a small piece of food when someone offers. Let's see if the world ends.”* He smiles to himself.

They laugh at a silly story across the table. The sound moves through him like a stitch pulling something back together. He feels something unfamiliar, hope. He tells himself softly, almost like a promise, *“I'll try. I'll be here. I'll see what happens.”*

From that moment on, he begins to change, slowly, genuinely. He starts respecting other religions. He no longer looks away when colleagues invite him to festivals or offer prasadam. He accepts it with a smile. He visits the Hanuman temple near his room. He learns dhyanam from the priest. The chanting calms him. He feels lighter. He becomes more open, with Muslims, Hindus, Christians. It no longer bothered

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him. What matters now is character, not category. All he thinks about is finding a reason, a strong reason, for himself and his parents to come out of the fear they've lived in.

Meanwhile, his churchmates begin questioning him about skipping prayers. They call his father and uncle about his *'strange behaviour.'* Gradually, he starts making more friends. He listens more than he speaks. The friendships grow naturally. He laughs more. He feels more present, more willing. He is changing.

One evening, in the office conference room, it's the rewards and recognition meeting. Tara stands stiff in front of her manager and team lead, Vani and Hussain. Her eyes are tired, burning with anger she is trying hard to control. Vani says, *"Tara... please sit down."* She doesn't move. Her jaw tightens. Hussain says softly, *"Tara, we know you're upset. But you have to understand, decisions like these involve multiple factors."*

She finally says, *"Multiple factors?"* pauses for a few seconds, *"I worked day and night for three months. I carried that project. I fixed issues no one even wanted to look at. But somehow, magically, all of those factors worked against me?"* Vani replies, *"Recognition is important, I understand. But you need to be mature enough to handle corporate decisions. Sometimes the company chooses people based on visibility and stakeholder alignment."* Tara interrupts, *"Oh, I'm sorry. Visibility? I was present in every meeting. I made sure you both were updated daily. What visibility are you*

talking about?" She laughs sarcastically, almost in disbelief. "Say it clearly that someone else played politics better. That's the factor, right?"

Hussain shifts uncomfortably, *"Tara, no one is denying your effort. We know you worked hard."* *"Then why am I standing here like someone who didn't matter? Why am I pretending to understand politics when hard work is supposed to mean something?"* she responds.

Tears fill her eyes. Vani says, *"Please understand, this attitude won't help you grow. You need to learn emotional control, Tara."* *"I had emotional control. I poured myself into that project. I skipped weekends. I didn't go out. I gave everything."* She gathers herself up, *"And the only thing I got in return was silence and avoidance,"* she responds. Vani's expression tightens, guilt mixed with discomfort. She continues, *"I didn't ask for the world. Just fairness."* *"I wasn't invisible. You just chose not to see me."* She turns to leave. *"Tara, wait!"* Hussain calls. Without turning back, she replies, *"I don't want to pretend everything is normal."* She walks out of the conference room.

She stands alone in the office corridor, overlooking the city. Her phone buzzes with messages from her friends. She ignores them. For two days, she barely speaks at work. No jokes. No chats. Just silence. Her friends don't disturb her. They give her time to heal.

At home, the room is dimly lit. Tara sits on the couch, resting her head. Her laptop bag lies untouched. She

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hasn't spoken much since returning home. Her father walks over quietly with two cups of tea. He sets one in front of her gently. Says, "*Drink it, beta. You haven't eaten properly since yesterday.*" She doesn't move at first. Then she slowly wraps her hands around the cup, but doesn't sip. He sits beside her. Silence.

He starts talking, "*I heard you crying last night.*" She shuts her watery eyes. She wipes them quickly, frustrated with herself. Her voice breaks slightly, "*I worked so hard, Nanna. I gave everything... and then they just...*" Her voice tightens, "*They didn't even acknowledge me. Like I was nothing.*" He looks at her for a moment, proud, protective, hurting for her.

"*Tara... this world runs on politics as much as it runs on talent. We faced this too. Every generation does.*" A pause. "*It's not always fair. And not everyone who deserves it gets recognised when they should,*" he says. She stares ahead, silent. He continues talking, "*Management sometimes sees what they want to see... not what is real. They play their game.*" After a small pause, "*But you don't need to lose your peace for their game.*"

She sips her tea. "*It hurts, Nanna. It feels like I failed.*" Her father reaches over and places a comforting hand on her head. "*No, ma. You didn't fail.*" He looks her in the eye, "*You succeeded, and your effort knows it. We know it.*" He pauses, "*And the right people will see it too, soon enough.*" He smiles softly. "*A job can reject*

your reward... but it can't reject your worth." She looks at him, eyes glistening. *"Let it go."* *"You are much bigger than one moment. Have food, rest well... and tomorrow, go with a calm mind."* He pats her back reassuringly. Finally, she nods slowly. Leans her head on her father's shoulder.

Weeks pass, and David starts to receive praise from his manager and peers for his productivity. During a team meeting, he takes a moment to thank Nethra for her support. Everyone applauds, and for the first time in a long while, he feels truly seen.

During Christmas time, the usual holiday season in corporate offices. Most people take long leaves. Kathy often comes over to Tara's house, sometimes just to relax, sometimes to talk about the guys she has been dating. Tara often stays over at Kathy's place, too. They watch movies together, laugh, and spend quiet evenings talking. Kathy's mother likes Tara very much and appreciates her nature.

Nethra is busy talking to the guy next door, Rohit. The two start flirting, exchange numbers, and begin chatting regularly. She keeps updating the group about him on WhatsApp, and everyone enjoys teasing her about it. David is now officially a part of the *Weee* group.

During the festival holidays, David goes to his village. His mother notices the change in him immediately, the way he speaks, the way he listens, the calmness in him.

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He drops hints, encouraging her to go out more, to talk to people, to visit temples. But she hesitates, still worried about what his uncle and society might think.

Surprisingly, his father seems impressed by the change. He listens with interest as David talks about his office and colleagues. There is a quiet pride in his eyes. He enjoys these conversations, sensing that his son is growing into someone more confident, more open. And then, one evening...

On *Weee*

Kathy: "*What are you guys doing?*"

Tara: "*Sitting on the balcony, enjoying the breeze.*"

Sends a snap

Nethra: "*I just woke up from a long nap. Loving this...*"

Kathy: "*Lucky you!*"

Tara (replying to Kathy): "*What's up with you?*"

Kathy: "*Just finished a novel, and I feel super empowered.*"

Tara: "*Oooh, which one?*"

Nethra: "*Yaar, don't motivate me during holidays...*"

Kathy (replying to Tara): "*THE ECHOES OF BLOOD.*"

Nethra: "*Sounds intense. What's it about?*"

Tara: "*Yeah... sounds like lots of killings.*"

Kathy: "*Some. But, not what you think! It's actually very creative, three stories from three different eras. It totally blew my mind. New author, simple narration. I liked it.*"

Tara: "*Oooh, now I'm curious. Bring the book when you come next time!*"

Kathy: "*Sure.*"

Nethra: *"Where is Mr. David? Hello sir, are you there?"*

A few minutes pass

David: *"Hey guys! Sorry, just saw the messages... I was playing cricket with friends."*

Nethra: *"Arey wah!"*

David: *"Not so wah, honestly. It's kind of chaotic here."*

Tara: *"What happened now?"*

David: *"People are upset with me for skipping meetings. My own uncle tried to slap me today. Dad's worried and sick about what's happening to me.*

Feels like I'm being treated like I've committed a crime."

Kathy: *"God!! This is crazy."*

David: *"Yeah. Your god. Or my god. Or someone else's. I've lost count."*

Kathy: *"You stole my dialogue. Haha..."*

Tara: *"Both of you Chup! When are you coming back?"*

"Oh, btw, Vishnu is planning a short trip with his gang. Should we plan something as well? Like a proper getaway?"

Kathy: *"YESSS! I'm totally in. Let's do this!"*

Nethra: *"Same here. I'm so done with this heat and holiday boredom."*

Tara (replying to Nethra): *"We understand the heat with Rohit but, why boredom?"* (laughing emojis)

Kathy (replying to Nethra): *"Wait... did you guys do it?"*

Nethra: *"NOOOO! STOP IT."*

David (sends a laughing emoji): *"Okay guys, count me in too. I really need to get out of here."*

Tara's home. Dining room. 7:30 p.m. The table is set, with fresh chapatis, hot rice, a bowl of steaming rasam,

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and paneer curry. Tara sits with her parents, half-lost in thought as she mixes rice with rasam. *"Dad, we're thinking of going on a short trip. Just for a couple of days,"* Tara says. Her father looks up, curious. *"Oh, really? That's nice. Where are you all planning to go?"* From the kitchen, her mother calls out in a slightly raised tone, *"Who all are going?"* *"No clue yet. We just spoke about it today. Haven't figured out the destination. Our options are Kerala, Goa, or Puducherry,"* she says and adds, *"It'll be with Kathy, David... and Nethra, Amma."*

Her mother raises an eyebrow but keeps her tone calm. *"Alright. Just be careful."* *"You worry too much, Amma. I'll be careful,"* Tara replies with a small smile. Her dad smiles. *"Plan somewhere like Shimla or any hill station. Those are perfect with friends."* Taking another bite, Tara nods. *"Yeah, we'll figure something out."*

As her mother wipes her hands on her apron, *"I miss him... don't know if he's eating properly."* Tara pauses, sets her spoon down, and gently holds her mother's cheeks. *"He'll be alright, baby."* Her mother smiles. Tara teases, *"smile, baby..."* Her dad turns to them, smiling. Her mom playfully looks at him, *"You take me to a nice place too!"* He laughs heartily. *"Why not? I'll pack before you do!"* Tara chuckles, finishing her food.

Just then, her phone buzzes. A video call from her brother. *"Oh! It's Captain **Thanvith!**"* she says, picking it up and turning the screen to her parents. Thanvith appears on screen, grinning. *"Look at that dinner setup!"*

Ugh, I miss Amma's food. I'm surviving, by the way." Her mother lights up instantly. *"Babu! You've lost more weight. Eat properly, kanna. I'll courier you podi and ghee!"* "Yes please. And some of that paneer curry too," Thanvith says. Her father asks, *"So, when are you flying?"* *"Next week, Nanna,"* Thanvith replies proudly. Tara adds, *"Anna, we're planning a trip with our colleagues. Might be a beach... might be the hills."*

Thanvith grins on the screen. *"Oh, I miss trips. Nice ra! Go somewhere that's not packed with tourists."* As they continue talking, Dad leans back in his chair, the warmth of the moment softening his face. A nostalgic spark appears in his eyes. He looks at Tara and says, almost excitedly, *"You know... remember that place I always told you about? The one that changed how I looked at life?"* Tara thinks for a moment. *"Yeah... the one with the wild hills?"* Dad's voice carries reverence. *"Ahobilam."* He pauses, then adds, *"About 300 kilometers from here."* A small smile spreads across his face. *"Oh boy... that place isn't just a trip. It's an experience."* He nods thoughtfully. *"I think the roads and accommodation must be better now. You should go. This is the right time to experience spirituality."* Tara smiles softly. *"Oh yeah... that's actually a good idea. I'll suggest it to our gang."*

Thanvith suddenly lights up on the call. *"Wait! My friend Hari is planning a trip with his US friends. What a coincidence, they're going to Ahobilam too. I spoke with him last night."* His dad's eyes brighten. *"Perfect! Tara, you plan with them. Beta, do one thing..."* Before

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he can finish, Thanvith laughs, *"I know, Dad. Leave it to me. I'll talk to Hari."* *"Thanks, Anna,"* Tara says. Her mom adds gently, *"Kanna, take care."* *"Yeah, Amma. Byeee,"* Thanvith replies, waving before the call ends. The room settles into a warm silence as the family finishes dinner, smiles lingering. Tara walks to her room, closes the door, and jumps onto her bed with a quiet excitement bubbling inside her.

On *Weee*

Tara: *"Hi all, had food?"*

David: *"Just now. What about you all?"*

Kathy: *"Not yet! I just finished my dance."*

David: *"I saw your reel, Kathy. Mind-blowing stuff! You're seriously turning into a pro!"*

Kathy: *"Thanks, man"*

Nethra: *"Hey everyone! Just wrapped up dinner. What's up?"*

Tara: *"So... I have a trip suggestion. Ahobilam. What do you all say?"*

David: *"I thought the options were Goa or Shimla. Where is Ahobilam?"*

Kathy: *"Never heard of it either."*

Nethra: *"Actually, my grandma used to talk about it. It's a powerful spiritual place."*

Kathy: *"Yaar, don't drag me to spiritual places pleaseee."*

Tara: *"Same here. I didn't know much either until my dad mentioned it. He said it's not just beautiful, he had a life-changing experience there."*

Kathy: *"Wow... Uncle got enlightened?!"*

Tara: *"Also, my anna's friend Hari is planning a trip*

with his US friends. Not sure about their dates yet, but I'll check."

David: *"Just googled it. Looks like a cluster of temples in the middle of hills... and hey, trekking! Count me in!"*

Tara: *"David, are you really okay with visiting a spiritual place?"*

David: *"Absolutely. I'll tell you, If I'm uncomfortable. Thanks for asking."*

Kathy: *"Hmm... I wanted a beach. But okay, I'm in."*

Nethra: *"Let's save the beach for next time, babe."*

Tara: *"So it's settled then. Ahobilam it is!"*

David: *"Yeah."*

Everyone agrees.

Hari's phone buzzes on the dining table. He glances at the screen; Thanvith calling. He picks up.

Hari: *"Bro, tell me."*

Thanvith: *"Dude, how's the party last night?"*

Hari: *"It was ok, we missed many, including you."*

Thanvith: *"I miss being there too. Couldn't skip my work. It's peak time for us." "And guess what? Tara and her office friends are planning a trip to Ahobilam this weekend."*

Hari pauses, surprised.

Hari: *"Oh really? What a coincidence."*

Thanvith: *"I know, right? My dad mentioned the place today, so I told them you're going to the same place with your friends."*

Hari: *"Yeah, they're landing in Hyderabad this Thursday. I'll talk to Tara and plan accordingly."*

Thanvith: *"Perfect. I'll share her number."*

Hari: *"She's already my mutual friend on Instagram, but send it anyway."*

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Moments later, Hari dials her number.

Tara: “*Hello...*”

Hari: “*Hi Tara, this is Hari; Thanvith’s friend.*”

Tara: “*Hello, Anna!*”

Hari: “*Thanvith said you’re planning a trip to Ahobilam. Coincidentally, we’re going this Friday. My friends land on Thursday night, so we can all start together.*”

Tara’s voice lights up instantly.

Tara: “*Really? That’s perfect! I didn’t expect the timing to match like this. It’ll be fun going together, count us in!*”

Hari: “*Great. I’ll update you once everything’s fixed.*”

Tara: “*Sure, Anna!*”

They hang up.

On *Weee*

Tara: “*Guys, we’re travelling this weekend!*”

Messages explode instantly, confetti emojis, fire reactions, and excited GIFs.

Kathy: “*WHATTT! That fast?!*”

Nethra: “*Finallyyyy! Bags packing mode ON!*”

David: “*Yesss! Let’s gooo!*”

Tara smiles and types again.

Tara: “*Hari anna said that his US friends are arriving this weekend.*”

Kathy: “*Ohooo... International dosths ah? Time to upgrade my flirting skills.*”

Nethra: “*Idiot!*”

The chat is filled with laughter reactions.

The Next Day

Tara unlocks her phone and types.

Tara: "*Hari anna, we're thinking of coming to the airport when your friends arrive.*"

Her phone buzzes.

Hari: "*Why?*"

Tara: "*Just to meet them and make friends.*"

Hari: "*Oh... okay. They land around 10:40 p.m..*"

Tara: "*Perfect. We'll be there.*"

A thumbs-up emoji pops.

She places her phone down and exhales slowly, a quiet excitement settling in her chest.

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03 **THE DESTINY**

**Late Night at Rajiv Gandhi International Airport,
Hyderabad.**

The arrival board flickers: Flight: Arriving Shortly.

Tara, Kathy, Nethra, Hari, and Hari's fiancée Sameera stand near the glass barrier where passengers exit. Kathy shifts from one foot to another, restless as ever and says, "*Ughh, I'm craving French fries.*" Tara laughs, "*They'll be here any minute, Kathy. Two minutes of patience, please.*" Nethra adds, "*Okay fine, you buy fries, I'll take a Coke.*" Tara turns and stares at her, with a look of betrayal in her face. Tara scoffs, "*You both?? Really?*" Kathy grins and grabs Nethra's wrist, "*Let's go.*" Tara sighs dramatically, "*Fine, but come fast! If you miss their entry, don't cry later.*" The two walk off, giggling, towards McDonald's.

Tara shakes her head fondly and turns back to Hari and Sameera. Sameera is leaning against Hari, her head resting on his shoulder, already sleepy. Tara asks, "*So... you guys are getting married?*" Sameera blushes and nods, "*Yes... very soon.*" Tara smiles warmly, "*Love marriage ah?*" Hari responds, "*Yeah... lots of love and a little drama.*" He smiles proudly. They all laugh.

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An announcement echoes overhead: flight arrival confirmed.

Tara leans closer, lowering her voice, “*Anna, one serious question... Why are these foreigners traveling all the way from America to Ahobilam?*” She frowns slightly, “*I don’t get it.*” Hari shrugs his shoulders, just as clueless, “*Hazel mentioned about a journal his great-great-grandfather wrote. Honestly, I’m just as curious as you.*” Sameera watches them both, amused by their confusion. Suddenly, Tara’s eyes light up as she notices movement beyond the glass. Tara whisper-shouting, “*They’re here!*” Hari smirks, “*Relax. They’re your age group only, not some 45+ foreigners.*” Tara exhales.

Minutes later, they arrive. “*Yup, here they are,*” Hari says, spotting Hazel. Tara turns back and waves at Kathy and Nethra, who are rushing in, fries in hand, Coke almost spilling as they hurry. Kathy freezes mid-step, fries halfway to her mouth, “*Ooo... they’re tall. Why is everyone from abroad tall?*” Nethra straightens her dress nervously, wiping her hands on the sides. Hazel walks ahead, glowing with excitement. Behind her is Olivia, then Hudson rolling his suitcase casually, and Liam scanning the crowd with calm eyes.

He says to Hudson, “*The airport looks awesome.*” “*Yeah... are we in India or back home already?*” Hudson responds. They laugh. All step into the arrival lobby, tired but curious, and the two worlds are about to meet.

Hazel spots Hari instantly. Her face lights up. She lifts her hand high and waves energetically, “Hari!” Hari laughs softly and waves back, stepping forward. Sameera, Tara, Kathy, and Nethra stand beside him, straightening up with polite excitement. They exchange quick smiles. Hazel reaches them first and, without hesitation, hugs Hari warmly, “*Thank you so much for all your help. Really. We couldn’t have planned this without you.*” Hari says, “*Hey, you’re welcome. I’m just glad you all made it safely.*”

She turns proudly to the others, “*So! This is Olivia... Hudson... and Liam.*” Olivia gives a gentle wave. Hudson grins. Liam nods politely. Hari gestures warmly, “*And this is my fiancée, Sameera.*” Sameera smiles softly, warmth in her eyes, “*Hi, nice to meet you. Welcome to India.*” Hazel beams and hugs her instantly, “*So lovely to meet you!*” Sameera blushes slightly. Hari gestures again, “*And as I mentioned to you, there’s another group travelling with us, that’s them.*”

Hazel turns, her face breaking into a bright smile, “*Oh, that’s great! Thanks so much for coming tonight, that’s really wonderful of you three.*” Olivia beams, Liam nods politely, and Hudson offers a small nod with his charming half-smile. Tara smiles warmly. “*Welcome to Bharath.*” “*And these are Kathy and Nethra,*” she adds, introducing them. Kathy gives a cool half-wave, fries still in hand. Nethra smiles politely, a little shy.

Tara gently passes a box of sweets to the Americans.

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“What’s this?” Hazel asks curiously. “In Telugu, we call them Arisalu,” Tara explains. “They’re a traditional South Indian sweet. Don’t worry, my mom made them.”

As Liam reaches out to pick one, Hazel says, *“What a lovely gesture.”* Olivia takes one as well and bites into it. Her eyes widen slightly. *“Oh wow... That’s so thoughtful of you. It’s delicious!”* she says, glancing at Hudson and Hazel in agreement. *“Thank you,”* Tara replies with a quick nod.

“Oh, by the way,” she adds, *“One more person will be joining us. He’s coming from his village, so he couldn’t make it tonight. But he’ll be there on the day we travel.”* *“Oh cool, the more the merrier,”* Hazel replies happily.

Hudson’s eyes drop to Kathy’s fries like he’s spotted treasure, *“Um... can I have one?”* Kathy raises one eyebrow like *‘respect for asking’*, then extends the box, *“Yeah, go ahead.”* Hudson doesn’t take one but two, without hesitation, and pops them into his mouth.

Everyone smiles. The ice is officially broken.

As they walk towards the cab, Hudson chews happily, *“Okay, best fries I’ve had after a 20-hour journey. Guess India’s already winning.”* Liam watches quietly, smiling at the effortless chaos. Olivia looks around, soaking in the warmth and unfamiliar energy.

Liam asks Kathy, *“So... Kathy with a K or C?”* Kathy laughs. *“No no! My full name is Kathyayini, fully desi.”*

Friends just call me Kathy.” Liam in surprise, “*Oh! My friend’s name is Cathy with a C, so I asked.*” She nods.

Nethra leans in and whispers something to Tara. Tara then asks, “*So, have you planned your accommodation as well?*” Hazel and the others nod with a small, relieved exhale. “*Yeah. Thanks to Hari, he helped us out.*” She responds. Tara smiles warmly, “*You’re always welcome to my place too. Anytime.*” The group looks touched. Olivia, “*That’s so sweet. We’d love to.*” She pauses, then smiles, “*But we really need sleep. These time zones are messing with us.*” They all laugh softly. Olivia adds, “*Let’s plan properly if there’s time, okay? And thank you, Tara. Really.*” Tara nods with a friendly grin. Hazel, “*So... see you all on the big day. Safe drive!*” Hudson excitedly says, “*Yeah, can’t wait.*”

Before they part, the group gathers for a few quick pictures, smiles, tired eyes, and the quiet excitement of something new about to begin. Tara waves with a smile, “*Great... bye, Hazel! Bye!*” looking at everyone. She then turns to Sameera and Hari, her voice soft with warmth, “*Bye, Sameera... bye, Hari anna.*” Sameera, “*Of course. See you soon.*” After a final round of smiles and nods, the groups part ways.

Tara walks towards her car, with Kathy and Nethra trailing behind. Nethra, “*Hey, let’s all sleep at Tara’s place today.*” Kathy agrees, “*Yeah, I’ll inform Amma.*” “*Me too.*” Netra nods. They head off together.

Meanwhile, Hazel’s group wheels their suitcases to the

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pickup lane. A sleek cab booked by Hari hours earlier pulls up. They turn back, waving goodbye before getting in. Hari and Sameera watch them for a moment, then turn and walk to their car. Starts the engine.

After a while, the Americans reach their hotel, a cozy, elegant place with a shimmering pool glowing under soft golden lights. The air carries the faint scent of jasmine. They're given two adjoining rooms, spacious, quiet, and exactly what they need after the long flight. As soon as they settle in, Hudson connects to the hotel Wi-Fi and video-calls Clara. Her face lights up instantly on the screen, "*Hey, handsome! You made it!*" Hudson smiles, tired but happy, "*Yeah, babe. We just checked in. The place looks great.*" From the other bed, Liam dramatically flops down, "*Hey, Hudson! Is June there with Clara?*" Clara laughs and turns the camera towards June, who rushes into view, waving excitedly, "*Hey, sleepyhead!*" Liam lifts his head just enough to see her, grins, then drops back onto the bed, "*Perfect. I can sleep peacefully now.*" Everyone laughs.

Hudson smiles into the camera, "*We're super tired, babe. Let us crash for a bit. We'll call you soon, okay?*" Clara nods, with a smile, "*Get some rest. Love you.*" "*Love you too,*" Hudson replies and ends the call.

In the next room, Olivia sits by the window, city lights reflecting off her phone screen. She records a soft voice note. "*Hey Dad... we reached the hotel safely. The flight was long, but we're fine. I'll call you after some rest,*

okay?” A moment later, his reply comes in. “*Good to know, sweetheart. Rest well.*”

Tara’s Home...

On *Weee*

Kathy: “*Finally met them!*”

[3 photos attached, group selfie, fries moment, arrival hall]

Nethra: “*They were so sweet and polite.*”

David: “*Nice pictures... happy faces. What are their names?*”

Kathy: “*The one in the denim shirt is Liam. Yellow-white striped polo, that’s Hudson.*”

Tara: “*The tall girl is Olivia. And the other one is Hazel.*”

David: “*Nice*”

They put their phones away. Kathy turns towards Nethra and Tara, “*Hudson seems fun.*” Nethra responds, “*Liam is handsome too. Do you think they opened their accounts?*” Tara, “*Haha!*” Kathy laughs, “*Haha, probably a couple of girls each already.*” Tara, “*You both continue talking, I’m sleepy.*”

That night, after returning home, Hari sits on the couch, scrolling through his phone. A small smile appears on his face as a thought crosses his mind. He opens WhatsApp and creates a new group. One by one, he adds everyone, including Sameera. He pauses for a second, thinking of a name.

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Then types: “*Destiny*” and hits Create. Almost instantly, messages begin popping up.

Nethra: “*Wow, nice name, Hari anna!*”

Hazel: “*I like it*”

Liam: “*Sounds like a movie title!*”

David: “*Hello everyone, this is David. Part of Tara’s group. Happy to meet you all.*”

Liam: “*Hey! Hi David*”

Hari smiles, reading the messages. Then he types the first official note.

Hari: “*Alright team, welcome aboard! Sameera and I are all set for this adventure with you guys. Let’s keep all updates here.*”

The group fills with cheerful emojis and warm replies.

Next morning, David arrives back in the city. As soon as he spots his friends waiting at their usual café corner, a wide smile spreads across his face. “*Look who’s glowing!*”, Kathy teases as he joins them. David laughs and drops into his chair, “*I’ve got so much to tell you guys.*” Tara sips her coffee, amused, “*Well? Go on, buddy.*” David leans forward, excited, “*You won’t believe it... I actually had real conversations with my friends. No awkward pauses. No hiding behind my phone.*”

Nethra leans forward, curious. “*That’s huge!*” He nods, the excitement clear in his tone, “*Yeah. I don’t know, something just changed. I met old folks, played cricket with them, I told you right... Some kids even joined us. It*

felt... natural, felt like my childhood.” “That’s amazing. See? When you open up, the world opens too.” Tara says. “Absolutely” he responds. The women are proud of him. “So how is the new team?” he asks. Kathy responds “Oh so friendly. They are nice.” Nethra, “True” A small pause. Kathy continues, “Hudson is... charming” she blushes. “WHOA WHOA, did I miss something?” he asks. Tara, “Kathy, you know he will go back to the USA in 15 days, right!” Kathy “Shit, don’t you think I know that? I’m living my imagination.” Nethra shows her index finger, “Then put a full-stop to your imagination too.” Kathy smirks, “Ah, idiots.” David & Tara laugh...

Blink: Message in *Destiny*

Hari: “Hey guys, I’ve booked a 12-seater Winger. Whenever you’re all ready, we can plan the trip accordingly. We’ll talk about the finances later.”

Hudson’s phone buzzes. He reads the message and grins, “Guys, message from Hari, he booked a 12-seater for all of us!”

In the other room, sunlight streams through the window as Olivia sits at the breakfast table, lazily spreading butter on her toast, “*Oh, I think we’re ready to travel. Don’t you think, Haz?*” “*Absolutely!*” she replies. Liam nods from across the table, his mouth full of omelette.

Moments later, Hudson types back.

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Across the city, Kathy opens the group chat, staring at the messages, waiting to see who responds first.

Hudson: *"Dude, we're ready to travel. Shall we start this evening? What about others?"*

Kathy: *"Great! We can start in the evening."*

Hudson: *"Cool then. Let's all gather!"*

Hari: *"Perfect! I'll fix a meeting spot and arrange a cab for Team America. Team India, I'll share the location."*

Everyone begins packing, homes filling with the sounds of zippers, chatter, and excitement. At Tara's house, her mom carefully folds clothes into the suitcase. Tara's mom, *"Pack some snacks, beta. You'll need them on the way."* *"Already on it, maa. Chips, biscuits; mission accomplished!"* says Tara.

Kathy's mom peeks into her room, arms crossed in mock surprise. *"Never thought you'd go to a spiritual place. I haven't even been there myself!"* Kathy rolling her eyes, *"Relax, ma. I wanted a beach trip, but the team voted for spirituality. Crazy, right?"* Her mom instantly says, *"It's called destiny."* *"Oh please! There's no such thing. I'm just going with friends and taking pictures, that's all."* Kathy says still packing her clothes. *"Fine, fine. Don't spoil your mood. Have a wonderful trip."* her mom says. Kathy half-smiles, slightly arrogant, but affectionate. *"Thanks, ma."*

Meanwhile, Nethra sits at the dining table, her suitcase zipped beside her chair. Her mom serves her lunch carefully, *"Eat properly, okay? And don't forget to carry a cap or an umbrella while under the sun."* Nethra

smiling softly, “*Sure, amma. Don’t worry.*” Her mom touches her head gently, “*My sweetheart...*”

In the bachelor’s flat, David stuffs the last of his clothes into his bag. His roommates pat his back, “*Finally, a trip, huh? A lot has changed!*” he laughs, “*Yeah, man. I’m excited.*” He waves goodbye and shuts the door with a small smile. By the evening, one by one, everyone makes their way to Tara’s house, the official gathering point, and they all head to the meeting spot Hari has fixed.

Hotel Lobby around 4:30 p.m. Warm light spills across the polished lobby floor as Tara and the group walk in, carrying backpacks. The foreign group is seated on the lounge couches, chatting casually. David slows near the entrance, hands tucked into his pockets. It’s his first time meeting them, and the hesitation shows on his face, unsure if his English will hold up. But Hudson’s easy grin and Olivia’s warm smile instantly put him at ease.

Olivia waves at him, “*Hey there! You must be David?*” he nods, offering a shy smile, “*Uh... yes. Hi.*” Quick introductions follow, half awkward, half curious. Breaking the silence, Nethra turns to Liam, who’s casually sipping from a beer can, “*So... There are so many places to visit in India like Goa, Jaipur, Varanasi. Why Ahobilam?*” Liam looks at Hudson, and both of them glance at Hazel, as if passing the mic. Hazel laughs softly and pulls out a small, old leather-bound journal from her bag, “*It was me. I’m the reason we’re*

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here.” She opens the book carefully. The pages are yellowed with age, “*This belongs to my great-great-grandfather... my poppy. He visited India decades ago.*”

The group leans in instinctively. She reads aloud, her voice gentle: ‘*I felt the greatness and presence of God. I stood in the times of Satya Yuga. The world must one day witness this sacred place, Ahobilam.*’ She closes the book softly, “*That line stayed with me.*”

Everyone sits in quiet admiration. Hazel smiles, “*I did some research, but it wasn’t enough for me. So...*” Olivia grins, “*So she pulled all of us into this adventure.*” Nethra and Tara exchange amazed glances, eyes drawn back to the vintage journal. Tara, “*That’s... incredible.*” David and Kathy glance at each other, eyes wide, both trying not to lean in too obviously but their curiosity betrays them. Kathy whispers to David, “*Cool, nah!*” “*Yeah... feels different hearing it from her.*” he nods quietly. Before anyone can say more, Hazel’s phone buzzes. She checks the screen and looks up with a smile, “*It’s Hari. He’s here, the vehicle’s ready.*”

The room suddenly comes alive, zipping bags, quick smiles, and that first spark of shared excitement before a long journey begins. The top of the vehicle is neatly loaded with luggage, tied down with ropes for extra space inside. Hari and Sameera stand beside the van, excited in their steps. Sameera adjusts her hair and smiles warmly at the group.

Hari, “*Alright everyone, this is our ride, our home for the*

next two days!" They all laugh and start climbing in. Hazel, Olivia, Hudson, and Liam take the back seats. Tara, Nethra, Kathy, and David settle in the middle. Hari and Sameera sit near the front.

Once everyone is seated comfortably, Hari turns and says, *"Oh, by the way, meet Mukund! He's our captain for this trip."* Mukund, a cheerful man in his early 30s with a friendly smile with a trimmed beard, turns slightly in his seat, *"Hello all... Namasthe!"* Hari adds, *"He's actually the owner of this transport company. He has around thirteen drivers, but when I told him about this trip, he decided to drive himself and be a part of it."* Everyone looks surprised. *"That's amazing!"* Hudson says and adds, *"That's like Elon Musk dropping us."* Mukund chuckles, *"Thank you, my ancestors visited Ahobilam long ago, but my parents and their cousins never made it. When Hari mentioned about the trip, something inside me said, 'Go for it.' So here I am."* They all smile, *"That's wonderful mate,"* Liam says. *"Feels like destiny is bringing everyone together."* Tara, gesturing her hands. Olivia responds, *"Yeah right!"* Kathy, *"Here we go again! I don't like the word destiny."* They all burst into laughter as Mukund starts the van and the engine hums to life. The vehicle slowly rolls onto the main road.

Mukund's eyes gleam in the rearview mirror. Suddenly, his voice rises with emotion, *"Narasimha Swamy ki...!"* Without hesitation, Tara and Nethra respond with bright smiles, *"Jai!"* Everyone looks at them, startled for a moment, then smiles. Mukund calls out again,

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louder, “*Narasimha Swamy ki...!*” This time, everyone joins in together. “*JAI!*” Laughter and cheers fill the van. Hazel looks happy. Eyes wide.

Olivia leans towards the window, admiring the endless stretch of hills and green fields passing by. Hudson has his earphones on, tapping his fingers lightly. Liam gazes out his window, families in cars, people walking along the roads, an auto-rickshaw packed with passengers.

Tara and David sit together. They continue to talk, and he tells her about his parents, and she listens with attention. Across the aisle, Kathy and Nethra chat excitedly about Ranbir Kapoor, laughing over one of his movie scenes.

An hour passes. The van grows quieter. Kathy turns around to see what’s going on behind. Liam scrolls through his phone, the screen glowing softly. Hudson explains something animatedly to Hazel. Olivia leans back and drifts off to sleep. She then leans towards Tara, “*I’m hungry. What about you?*” Tara nods and calls out, “*Hari anna! Shall we stop at a nearby dhaba for dinner?*” He glances into the mirror, “*Yeah, we’ll stop soon; the next dhaba we see.*” Mukund raises a thumb in agreement.

Ten minutes later, Mukund slows the van and pulls over beside a roadside dhaba glowing under yellow tube lights. Nethra turns to Hazel, “*We’ll have dinner here.*” Hazel, “*Sure! Oli, come on, let’s eat something.*”

One by one, they climb down. Olivia stretches and says without hesitation, *"I need to pee. Where do I go?"* Tara walks to the dhaba owner and asks about the washroom. He points to a narrow path beside the kitchen. Tara gestures to Olivia to follow. The washroom smells bad, but it's manageable.

After everyone freshens up, Hari and Sameera pick a large table and sit down. They order food for everyone, following Hazel's suggestions. As they wait, Nethra leans towards Olivia and whispers, *"How's the washroom?"* Olivia nods. *"Okay. Better than some of the subway washrooms in the U.S.,"* Nethra laughs.

As plates clatter, Liam leans to Hazel, *"So... what did you suggest?"* Hazel, *"Totally vegetarian."* Liam and Hudson exchange looks of disbelief. Liam, *"Veg?"* Hudson, *"I'm starving, Haz... why'd you go vegetarian?"* Just then, the waiter arrives, placing steaming bowls of Butter Paneer Masala and Methi Chaman on the table, their surfaces glistening with butter, along with a pile of soft, hot naans. Kathy sadly, *"Hari anna, why veg? I wanted butter chicken."*

The Americans all look up at once, instantly reminded of their favourite butter chicken night back home. Hari smiles, *"I know it's a disappointment, but let's avoid non-vegetarian food until we have darshan. It's good practice."* Everyone nods in agreement. Kathy and David glance at each other, half-smiling. Kathy to David: *"Just for a couple of days."* He nods. *"Yeah... it's alright."*

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Everyone's hands are busy tearing naan, dipping into buttery gravies, and exchanging wide-eyed looks of approval. Liam with his mouth half full, "Oh man... this is so good!" Hudson, "Didn't expect this to taste so good." Hari grins, "Told you." Olivia wipes her lips, her face glowing, "Wow... amazing." Nethra and Tara share a laugh, watching them eat with so much enthusiasm. Mukund joins them, smiling proudly, "*This place is famous for their food.*" Hari nods with a satisfied sigh.

Suddenly, the dhaba speakers blast the famous "***Naatu Naatu***" song. A few locals tap their feet, and soon everyone at the table starts humming along. Liam claps to the beat, excited, "*Hey! We know this song!*" Hazel grins and taps the table lightly in rhythm.

The rest burst into laughter, their voices mixing with the music. Even the waiters pause for a moment, smiling at the scene. David watches them quietly. He has always been taught not to waste time on entertainment. The laughter, the carefree singing, the music, it all feels new to him.

The group laughs together, their different accents blending with the beat. One song, one rhythm - tying them all together. Other diners turn to watch, some clapping along. The ambience is filled with warmth and shared joy under the dhaba lights. Hazel and Hari step aside near the counter, quietly discussing the bill. Tara takes out her notepad, "*Okay, dinner for eleven... and the vehicle fuel from evening. Let's keep track of*

everything.” Hazel adds the numbers carefully while Hari nods, *“We’ll split everything at the end. Easy.”*

Meanwhile, Hudson, Liam, and Olivia walk towards the kitchen window to meet the chef. Hudson, *“Hey, that was amazing food, man. Seriously.”* Liam, *“Loved it.”* The chef smiles shyly, wiping his hands on his apron, *“Thank you, sir.”*

Olivia, *“We loved it!”* The chef chuckles, visibly touched. David watches the moment in surprise, the gratitude, the warmth, it feels new to him... people thanking a cook, smiling at strangers. He keeps observing, thinking how natural and kind they all seem.

Before leaving, they take a few pictures, stretch a little, and wave goodbye to the dhaba owner. Mukund starts the engine.

David, seated by the window, stares at the passing lights. His phone vibrates, it’s his uncle. He ignores it. A minute later, it rings again, this time it’s Daniel from the Church.

He exhales, hesitant, then answers.

David (low tone): *“Hello?”*

Daniel (voice sharp, urgent): *“Where are you?”*

David (carefully): *“I came to the city... some project work.”*

Daniel: *“The father is deeply concerned. He feels you’re falling into the wrong company. He wants to see you*

immediately.”

A long pause. His fingers curl around the phone.

David (quietly): *“I’m not available. I have to go now.”*
He ends the call - no goodbye, no explanation.

He looks out of the window. Beside him, Tara notices his expression, asks softly, *“Who was it, bro? Is everything okay?”* He forces a smile, *“Yeah... I told you before, right? It’s them. They don’t stop.”* *“Block them, if you want to.”* she says. He gives a half-laugh, eyes still on the road, *“Then they’ll trouble my parents.”* She looks at him, understanding without words.

A minute later, she leans back with a happy sigh. *“Okay... food’s done. Time for music!”* Before anyone can say anything, Olivia jumps in, *“Wait! Let’s play a game.”* Kathy, instantly excited, *“What game?!”* Olivia, *“Alright. Hari will connect his Bluetooth. Everyone gets to play their favourite song. Just for a minute or two... depending on how much we’re vibing.”* The van erupts. *“Yesss!”* *“Let’s do it!”*

He connects to Bluetooth. Hazel, *“Okay, let’s start with Hari!”* He hesitantly says, *“Ladies first, please.”* Sameera takes the phone, hiding the screen like it’s a password.

The moment the song starts, *“Levitating.”* A scream erupts inside the van. Olivia, *“I LOVE THIS SONG!”* Liam and Hudson exchange looks. Hudson whispers, *“Dua is hot.”* Kathy overhears and laughs, nudging Nethra. Sameera sways her shoulders, leaning towards

Hari. He blushes as everyone teases him. “*Come on, Hari! Dance!*”

Sameera laughs and hands him the phone. Hari, “*Is it okay if I play a regional song?*” Everyone: “*Go on! Anything!*” He hits play, “***Maari Thara Local.***” Instant chaos. “*OH.. what a beat!*” Liam while tapping his foot. Kathy, “*I wanna dance!*” Feet tap, heads bob, shoulders bounce in their seats. Hari passes the phone to Kathy. She types confidently and plays “***Kala Chashma.***” Hudson and Liam explode into seat-dancing. Nethra whispers, “*You got extra points, babe. Look at them!*” Kathy quietly fist-bumps her. She passes the phone to David. He stiffens. David: “*Sorry... I don't know any song.*” Before it gets awkward, Tara grabs the phone. “*Playing my favourite, APT.*” The van turns into a mini nightclub. People shout, heads spin, hair flies. She passes the phone to Hazel. She hides her face, “*God... I'm embarrassed. I don't know any good beats.*” Before she can refuse, Hudson snatches the phone, “*Then I'll help you.*” He types and plays “***Uptown Funk***” The van ROARS. Even Mukund moves his head slightly, one hand still on the steering wheel. Everyone claps to the beat, shouting along.

He passes the phone to Olivia, she thinks dramatically for two seconds, “*I have too many favourites... but okay.*” She plays “***Makeba.***” The intro is slow. Everyone stares. Olivia laughs, “*It's awkward, I know. Just wait...*” The beat drops. “*Oooohe!*” The entire van shouts in perfect rhythm. Shoulders dance. Hands clap. The phone goes to Liam, “*I was thinking about this*

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since the beginning.” He plays “***Stayin’ Alive.***” Classic vibes fill the van. Everyone turns into a 70s disco star. Sameera laughs, impressed looking at everyone having fun. “*Who’s left?*” Everyone shouts together: “***NETHRAAAA!***” Nethra, “*Okay, my turn.*” She plays “***Run It Up***” The bass kicks in. The mood turns edgy.

A minute later, Hazel raises her hand dramatically. “*Okay... so who wins?*” Voices fly from everywhere. “***Hudson!***” “***Hudson!***” “***Definitely Hudson!***” Hudson bows like he just won a Grammy... then suddenly straightens up. Hudson, “*Wait... actually, I loved Nethra’s choice.*” He leans forward from his seat, stretching his arm towards her. Hudson, “***Respect.***” “***Fist bump?***” Nethra blinks, surprised for a second... then smiles and lightly bumps his fist.

Finally, as the laughter settles and the last note of disco fades, the van grows quieter. Everyone leans back, breathless, smiling, glowing. A warm, happy silence fills the space. Slowly, one by one, they rest and fall asleep.



Way to Ahobilam.

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04 **THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY**

Early Morning - Ahobilam

They reach Ahobilam around 4:00 a.m. Exhausted from the night drive, the group heads straight to their rooms: Hudson and Liam in one, Olivia, Sameera, and Hazel in another. Kathy, Nethra, and Tara take one room, while Mukund, Hari, and David settle into the last. They drag their bags up the stairs, yawning and stretching. The rooms are small but clean. Within minutes, everyone crashes onto their beds.

7:00 a.m. The fog floats gently between the trees. Soft temple bells ring in the distance, blending with birds singing and the monkeys are playfully jumping from branch to branch. Tara blinks awake as pale bluish light filters through the curtains. She yawns then notices Kathy and Nethra's blankets folded neatly and their beds empty. In a groggy voice, "*Hmm... where are they...?*" She pulls on her hoodie and steps outside.

At the corridor entrance, Kathy and Olivia stand side by side, leaning against the wooden railing, arms crossed, smiling as they watch a troop of monkeys hop across the branches. Tara, "*Good morning.*" Kathy smiles, "*Good morning! You slept well, huh?*" Olivia, "*Morning.*" "*Kind of.*" she responds.

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Inside the room, Hazel brushes her teeth. Hudson looks up at her, blinking, half-awake. Hudson, “*Morning.*” He grabs his phone, connects to the Wi-Fi, and texts Clara.

Moments later, David, Liam, and Mukund walk up the steps, slightly sweaty from a brisk morning walk. Mukund carries a water bottle, and David claps rhythmically like a child, grinning. Liam looks at Olivia & others, “*Good morning all.*” Olivia, “*Morning. Where did you all go?*” David, “*We just went for a walk. It’s peaceful.*” Nethra, “*Someone’s in a good mood.*” Tara, “*Yeah, right.*” Kathy eyes on the trees, “*God, how many monkeys!*” David laughs, “*A lot more on the streets too.*” Hazel steps out after washing her face, “*Wow...*” Hari joins them, hands on his hips, “*Alright, team... let’s freshen up and grab some breakfast.*” He adds, “*By the way, there are two Ahobilams. Lower and Upper. Today, we’ll go to Lower. The morning darshan there is beautiful.*”

Olivia, “*Oh, I thought the trek was today! I mentally prepared myself to climb.*” Hudson, “*Honey, we should have energy to do that.*” Liam nods, “*Yeah.*” Hazel, “*Alright, let’s fuel up first.*” David responds to Olivia, “*Actually, we spoke with the locals about the trek. We’ll need to start by 5:30 a.m., It’s long and a bit tough.*”

Nethra, yawning and covering her mouth, says, “*Then Lower today is perfect. We need to recover from the night journey. And Mukund anna needs rest.*” Mukund, “*Haha, thank you, madam. My back agrees.*” Kathy

dramatically clutching her stomach, *"I'm just hungry. Here is the plan: eat, shower, temple... then I'll crash. Before or after lunch that depends."* Everyone laughs.

Tara, *"Alright then. Breakfast first. Let's gooo!"* They lock their rooms and head to a small restaurant that Mukund spotted earlier. They sit on the wooden benches outside a tiny restaurant, finishing a perfect South Indian breakfast: dosa, puri, wada, chutneys and steaming sambar. As Tara talks to her mom over a video call, the rest of the gang debates over which item deserves first rank; dosa and wada are tied. Kathy leans towards the phone, sweetly, *"Bye, Auntie. Bye, Uncle!"* before Tara ends the video call with her parents.

The aroma of filter coffee drifts through the air. Hudson looks at the coffee in a steel glass supported by a steel bowl, *"Wow! This smells awesome. Never tried coffee this way."* Liam nods in agreement. *"Yeah, mate."* Hazel and Olivia keenly observe him, recording his expression. Hudson sips the coffee, *"Damn! Straight through my head."* Liam nods in ecstasy, *"Ooooo... Wow! refreshing."*

They all laugh. They slowly get up and walk to their rooms. Liam turns to David, *"Is it your first time too?"* he answers, *"Yeah. Never been to any spiritual place. My mother... She doesn't believe in any God. So I didn't grow up with any of this."* Liam asks curiously, *"Why did you jump into Christianity?"* *"My parents did. I just followed them,"* he answers. *"I'm British, by the way, I*

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know about the conversions that happened all over the world.” He then adds softly, “But see where we landed eventually.” Both laugh.

As they walk, Kathy asks curiously, “*So, what did you see on your early morning walk?*” Nethra, walking beside David and Liam, listens closely. David replies, “*I heard Suprabatham very soothing, I saw women sweeping their verandas, smiling. Men sitting under big trees with chai and newspapers. Kids playing barefoot. And... I saw peace.*” He pauses. “*Their eyes weren’t pretending and their smiles were real.*” There is a short silence. Liam says, “*You really enjoy little things. That’s a good thing, mate.*” Nethra adds gently, “*He had a rough childhood... and teenage.*” David nods quietly, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. Tara says, “*Okay, let’s not get late for darshan. The rooms are close by, let’s freshen up and head to the temple.*” Hazel adds, “*Yeah. I still smell like leather seats and dosa.*”

Tara and Nethra insist on dressing Hazel and Olivia in traditional sarees, carefully draping the fabric and adjusting every pleat until it falls just right. By the time they’re done, Both hardly recognize themselves. The elegance of the sarees transforms them soft, graceful, and undeniably striking. They look stunning.

Hudson pauses for a second, clearly impressed, before pulling out his phone. He snaps a picture of the two of them, a small grin tugging at his lips, and quickly sends it to Clara. “*I wanna see you wearing this,*” he types.

Around 9:30 a.m., As the group begins walking toward the temple, the atmosphere shifts. People nearby turn to look, some with curiosity, others with admiration. There's something about the way they carry themselves, the blend of cultures, the confidence in their steps that draws attention effortlessly. They slowly reach along the pathway of Lower Ahobilam. They leave their footwear neatly at the designated spot, the stone floor cool beneath their feet. While the others wait, Tara pauses to buy a small bundle of fresh flowers. With the offering in hand, they walk in the direction of the main gate.

The moment they step inside, their pace slows. Instinctively, everyone's head turns, first to one side, then the other, tracing a full circle in quiet awe. Massive stone pillars rise around them, imposing and timeless, their surfaces carved with stories. Light slips between the columns, catching the edges of the carvings and casting long, reverent shadows across the floor.

For a brief moment, no one speaks. The sheer scale of the place demands silence, as if the stones themselves are watching, waiting to be acknowledged. Towering pillars carved with divine forms, intricate rock sculptures, and ancient inscriptions catch the sunlight, their shadows stretching across the stone.

David asks one of the temple priests eagerly, "*Sir, do you know when this temple was built?*" Kathy and Liam listen too. The others are already ahead in the queue.

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Diguva Ahobilam – Narasimha Swamy temple.

The priest smiles, adjusting his shawl, “*This is said to date back to the Vijayanagara dynasty period. But its roots go even further. This land breathes stories, son.*”

He nods silently, pulls his phone from his pocket, and starts typing about the Vijayanagara Dynasty on the web. Liam and Kathy bend their heads towards the screen, excited to see the results. They are surprised to learn that it dates back to a time long before the British came to India. They look at each other, exchanging shocked expressions. The group finishes darshan and takes many pictures, some with the temple gopuram in the background and some with monkeys behind them. As the rest of the group settles down in one of the mandapas, David, Hazel, and Liam decide to walk around and explore the temple grounds. They move slowly, taking in every corner, every detail carved into stone.

Soon, they come across a small, museum-like area displaying abandoned stone carvings, broken statues of Gods, some cut cleanly in half. These are remnants of destruction carried out during the Delhi Sultanate period. Hazel stops in her tracks. She studies the damaged sculptures closely, her expression heavy. The craftsmanship is unmistakable, with delicate lines, complex expressions, and frozen perfection. A quiet sadness settles over her as she thinks about the loss, the violence done to such extraordinary artwork. David and Liam feel it too. They spend nearly an hour there, carefully observing each piece, moving from one sculpture to the next, as if paying silent respect.

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Liam finally breaks the silence, “*It’s way beyond,*” he says softly. “*I honestly don’t know what tools they used back then to achieve this kind of fine detail.*” Hazel nods in agreement, and David does the same, both clearly in awe of the skill and patience behind the carvings. On the other side of the temple complex, the mood lightens. They spot a few horses resting near the outer area. Hazel’s face brightens instantly. She steps back, positions herself with the horses in the background, and takes a quick selfie, smiling wide, a small moment of joy. She calls David and Liam to join her.

After spending some more time wandering through the temple corridors, they head back to the mandapa where the rest of the group is sitting, laughing, and chatting. Olivia and Kathy are busy playing with a few monkeys nearby, tossing bits of food and laughing at their antics. Nethra sits at a little distance, smiling quietly as she watches them.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a baby monkey jumps straight onto Nethra. Everything goes silent. Nethra freezes instantly and closes her eyes tightly. She doesn’t want to know what’s happening. The little monkey starts rummaging, peeking into her hair, tugging gently, then moves towards her handbag. Nethra clutches her bag and phone tightly against her chest, barely breathing. Olivia quickly says, trying to calm her, “*Nethra, you can open your eyes. It’s just a baby.*”

Before the sentence even settles, another monkey, much bigger, leaps onto Olivia’s shoulder. “*OMG!*” Olivia

screams, shutting her eyes immediately. Nethra opens her eyes in panic. “*What? What? What happened?*” She turns her head and sees Olivia frozen in fear with the monkey on her shoulder. For a second, Nethra tries and fails to suppress her laughter. Olivia, still screaming, blurts out, “*Big or small? Big or small?*” Kathy panics replies, “*Medium.*” “What? What do you mean by medium?” Olivia shrieks. “*Okay... BIG,*” Kathy corrects instantly.

Now everyone panics at once. Hari raises his voice firmly, trying to control the situation. “*Relax, guys. Say Jai Sree Ram.*” Almost together, Nethra and Olivia chant, “*Jai Sree Ram.*” As if on cue, the small monkey jumps off Nethra’s head and scampers away. The larger one on Olivia’s shoulder loosens its grip slowly, carefully climbing down her arm. It pauses, reaches her hand, stares intensely at everyone, and suddenly lets out a sharp, frightening sound, locking eyes with Liam. Startled, Olivia blurts out once more, “*Jai Sree Ram!*” The monkey then climbs down to her legs, touches her feet gently, and finally walks away into the temple grounds. Only then does the group exhale, relieved, shaken, and already on the verge of laughter.

Minutes later, they feed grass to cows and a calf nearby, while some walk around the koneru. The vendors smile while looking at the foreigners, happy faces everywhere. Some locals take pictures with them. Finally, they all head back to their accommodation in quiet reflection. David walks slightly slower than the others, his face unreadable, lost in thought.

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Kathy notices and asks, “Hey... you okay?” He responds softly, “Uh... deeply confused.” Hazel and Hudson walk beside him. “Confused? About what?” Hazel asks. He pauses, “Honestly, I come from a family where one parent stopped going to temples... and the other doesn’t believe in God. But today... I saw something beyond logic. Something sacred. And all I can think is, why did they leave this? Why did they let go of our roots?”

The group pauses with him. A few monkeys chatter nearby, the only background noise. Suddenly, he pulls out his phone, dials his father, and walks a little to the side.

Ringing...

Nanna (picks up): “Ha, babu. How are you?”

David (calmly): “I’m fine, Nanna. How’s Amma? Are you both okay?”

Nanna (concerned): “We’re good, beta. Why this sudden call? Is everything okay?”

David (directly): “Nanna... just two questions. Why did we leave Hinduism? Why did we stop going to temples?”

There’s a pause on the other end. Birds chirp faintly.

Nanna (sighs, voice low): “When you were young... Your uncle was part of a political group, and he was friends with other religious leaders who came to our village. They were converting people, promising security and support. Your mother... She was emotionally vulnerable. They convinced her.”

David listens intently, his eyes narrowing slightly. His dad continues, “But later, she saw through it. She

realised it was never about faith, it was all about votes. She felt betrayed. And over time... she just lost interest. We stopped following rituals. And yes... they changed our names too. What shouldn't have happened had already happened."

David (straight): *"Do you remember my original name?"*

He waits for the answer and pauses.

David quietly: *"...Okay. My friends are calling. I'll call you tomorrow, Nanna."*

Nanna: *"Alright, babu. Take care."* The call disconnects.

He lowers the phone slowly. His friends wait, not pushing, just standing close. Nethra asks, *"Everything okay?"* Hazel looks at him, puzzled. After a pause, he responds, *"Yeah."*

The group sits around two joined tables, steam rising from hot sambar and fresh ghee rice. Steel tumblers clink softly as servers refill water. At the next table, a group of Malayalis sits together, and one of them plays *'Puthiyoru Lokam'* on his Bluetooth speaker. Liam, who usually prefers slower music, perks up. He gets up and walks over. *"Hey, I'm Liam. Nice to meet you."* The guy smiles, extending his hand. *"Hi, I'm Varun."* Liam shakes his hand, *"I like the music you're playing. Mind sharing the link?"* *"Oh yeah, sure,"* Varun says, sending it to him. *"Well, thanks, that's really nice of you."* Liam gives him a quick fist bump and heads back to his seat.

Hazel takes a bite of papad. Olivia, trying to eat rice with a spoon, nods. *"I can do this."* Hudson points at

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the podi. “*What’s this red powder? It tastes amazing.*” Liam laughs. “*Spicy?*” Kathy, her mouth full, smiles. “*No, it’s normal spice.*” Hari and Sameera eat while talking to each other. David eats quietly, enjoying the food. Nethra smiles at Hudson, watches him appreciate each bite. The servers move around quickly, placing more papads, pouring rasam, and smiling warmly.

After their lunch, the rooms are quiet and dim, curtains drawn halfway to block the sharp afternoon sun. Some lie down, some change clothes, some sip water. David sits near the window, elbows resting on the sill, eyes fixed on the hills outside. There is a heaviness in his expression, as if he is still walking through the morning’s temple corridors in his mind.

Hazel walks in, hands a water bottle to Hari, who is sitting on the bed, untying his shoelaces. She pauses, noticing David’s distant look. Hazel asks, “*You want to share anything, buddy?*”

He turns and answers “*I’m stunned. The architecture... the energy.*” Hazel gives a soft, knowing smile. As they talk, others begin trickling into the room: Tara, Nethra, Kathy, and Liam. They keep quiet, sensing something meaningful unfolding, and listen from wherever they settle. Hazel sits beside him, “*Look... as per my knowledge, you’ve only seen the lower part. This one was built by a king.*” She leans forward slightly. “*But tomorrow... we’re going to Upper. The original one.*” His eyes widen, a spark of wonder replacing his usual calm. “*Ohh! Yeah, I totally forgot,*” he responds.

Hazel reaches into her backpack and pulls out the journal. She opens it gently. “*You saw this, right?*” she asks him. She flips to a page covered in neat handwriting, sketches of hills, temple structures, and a few lines describing the greatness of ancient temples, one of them being Ahobilam. He leans closer, almost reverently.

“*I still can’t believe you guys came all the way from the US to experience this.*” Hudson responds with a smile, “*Yet, believable.*” Hazel looks at him, her emotion quiet and steady.

“*Exactly,*” she says, closing the journal gently. Kathy slowly steps closer. “*Can I have a look at your journal?*” she asks. Hazel nods and gently hands it over. Kathy takes it with both hands. She flips through the pages, her eyes widening at the old sketches and notes. David, unable to hold back his excitement, slides off his chair and sits right next to her, leaning forward so much that his head almost bumps into Kathy’s shoulder. Hazel, smiling at their eagerness, sits down on the edge of the bed. Liam stands behind them with folded arms, peeking over their heads.

Tara and Nethra crouch beside the bed, watching quietly. Kathy runs her fingertips over the faded pencil lines, “*Being in the country, we never had the courage or interest to do something like this. I think you’re changing me Hazel.*” “*A lot of people in India are unaware of their history. I agree,*” Hazel responds with a smile. Kathy, in awe, says, “*Wow... he documented everything.*”

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Hazel nods, “*He believed places like this aren’t just temples... they’re experiences. He wanted someone in the family to come someday. I guess... it ended up being me.*” Kathy closes the book, tears in her eyes. She realizes something, stands up, and hugs Hazel. “*I have to apologize to my Amma for always being rude to her,*” she says. Everyone comes close and hugs her and slowly disperse to their rooms. A quiet moment.

After a good afternoon nap, they all gather in the small common space between their rooms, some sitting on the floor, some on the edges of beds, some leaning against the wall. Olivia, stretches out her legs, quizzes Tara and Nethra after learning they all work at the same company. Olivia, surprised, said, “*So in India, software engineers get good compensation?*” “*That’s... actually pretty good!*”

Liam laughs, rubbing his calves, “*Yeah, but the workload? Insane. These guys practically live in offices.*” Nethra says, “*I strongly agree,*” and laughs. Hudson raises his eyebrows and says, “*Facts. You’re paid to lose your hair early.*” Tara laughs.

Coming from her room, Hazel says, “*Hudson, your girlfriend is calling you. Why is your phone on silent?*” “*Oh shit, I forgot to turn it on,*” he says and rushes away.

The girls continue talking. Nethra looks at Hazel and asks, “*Girlfriend?*” She responds, “*Yeah, Clara. Nice one. We all love her.*” Kathy groans playfully. “*Ugh!*”

Lucky girl." Hazel and Olivia laugh. Nethra bursts out laughing. *"He's taken, babe."* Olivia looks at Kathy. *"Are you serious?"* Kathy responds. *"Not really, just impressed."* Just then, Nethra's phone rings. Amma is calling. She straightens up a little, smiling warmly as she answers.

Nethra: *"Hi, Ma..."*

Everyone falls silent instinctively, respecting the call.

Amma (over the phone): *"Are you eating on time? How's the place?"*

Nethra: *"Yes, Ma. The place is beautiful. We're eating well and resting too."*

Amma: *"When are you coming back?"*

Nethra: *"Day after tomorrow morning."*

Amma: *"Okay... take care. Are your friends doing fine?"*

Nethra glances around at the group.

Nethra: *"Yes, Ma. They're all doing well. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Bye..."*

The call ends.

She sets her phone aside. A small pause settles. Olivia, *"Your mom is cute."* Nethra smiles softly, *"Thank you. She worries a lot."* Liam, leaning his back against the wall, murmurs, *"Parents always do."* Everyone agrees.

Everyone has an early dinner around 8 p.m. and drifts into a deep, peaceful sleep. Except for Hudson and David. Hudson tries to explain the UNO game to David. He then says, *"I heard you had a rough childhood. I'm sorry, man."* David responds, *"The thing is... I didn't even know it was a rough childhood."* He

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pauses. *"I thought that was just the way it was."* Hudson pauses for a couple of seconds. *"Don't worry, man. We learn and correct ourselves... that's how we move forward."* He gives David a high-five and says, *"Good night, buddy."*

Early Morning, 5:20 a.m. The sky is still wrapped in shades of violet and soft grey. The group steps out of the hotel, wrapped in light jackets, some still blinking sleep away but smiling with anticipation. Nethra checks her small backpack. *"Water bottles? Snacks? Fruits? Did we miss anything?"* Olivia stretches her arms above her head. *"I don't think so. We're packed like we're trekking the Himalayas."* Tara asks, *"Wait, did you bring painkillers?"* Nethra nods, teasing, *"Yes, Mom. It's with the dry fruits."* She laughs, *"Perfect."*

Mukund starts the engine. Moving uphill, the van hums along the steep road carved into the hills. Mist lingers on the treetops. Mountain figures rise one after another, like layers of an old painting. David sits by the window, eyes wide, a peaceful smile tugging at his lips. For a moment, he seems like a child seeing nature for the first time. Olivia asks, *"Hey, quick question. Why do I see so many monkeys here?"* Mukund, still focused on the road but smiling, replies, *"Madam, wherever there's divinity, you'll find monkeys and cows. They're part of the sacred energy."* Hazel, impressed, said, *"Wow... that's a beautiful insight."* Tara, half-asleep with her cheek against the cold window, says, *"They're like unofficial temple guardians..."* The road curves as the forest thickens, monkeys hopping along

PAVAN KUMAAR DASARI

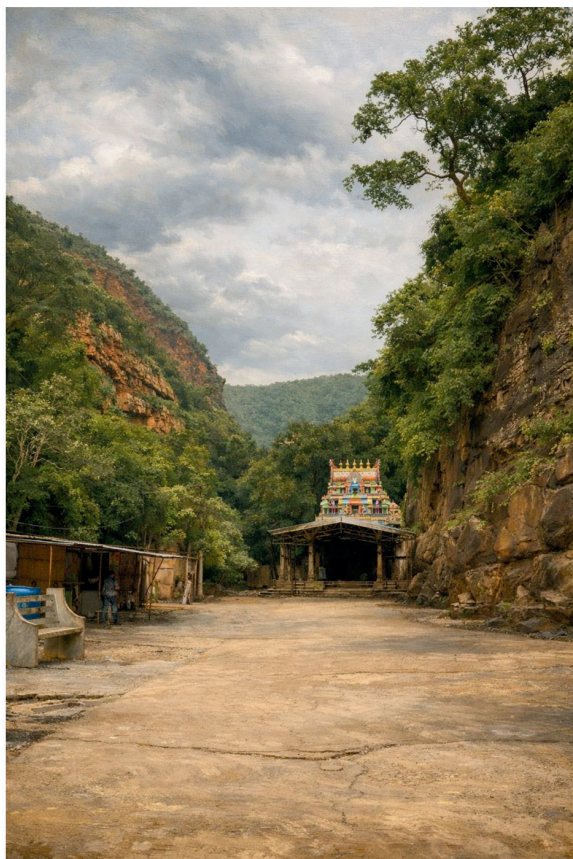
branches like they're escorting the group. The van comes to a halt after a 20-minute drive.

A cool breeze rushes in as the doors open. They step out, stretching, rubbing their hands, adjusting their bags. In front of them lies a breathtaking sight, a massive U-shaped split in the mountains, towering and ancient, a natural gateway, as if the earth itself parts to welcome them.



Hudson's jaw drops, "*Wow. Guys, let's get a picture here.*" They pose together, the U-shaped split mountain in the background. They begin their walk, passing small stalls with coconuts, framed photos of deities, turmeric-smeared idols, and handmade offerings. A small Koneru glistens to the right, and just beyond it, carved stone steps start to ascend the rock. Their footsteps echo on the ancient stone. Around them, the forest hums with birdsong. They are slowly surrounded by the embrace of two towering mountain faces, and nestled between them is a temple that looks like it has grown straight from the earth.

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Ugra Narasimha Swamy temple.

Tara says softly, “*Let’s go in.*” They remove their footwear and step towards the sanctum. The scent of camphor and incense fills the air. A priest chants softly inside. Bells ring. With each step, the world outside fades. There is very little crowd. One by one, they enter the temple, eyes moving in every direction, taking in its stunning beauty.

Kathy and David walk together, slowly running their fingers along the stone wall with wonder. The carvings are weathered yet alive, whispering stories from centuries past. A priest notices David, “*What are you looking at so intently, babu?*” David, in awe, “*These carvings...*” “*Wonderful, isn’t it?*” the priest says with a smile. “*Ahobilam Narasimha Swamy Temple is one among the Nine Narasimha temples. This temple is also called the main temple of Ahobilam. Those who are unable to visit all nine temples come here to receive Swamy’s blessings. This is the first temple on the route.*” He adds, “*If you observe the deity here, Swamy appears in Ugra Narasimha posture: the fierce form.*” After the serene darshan, the group settles in a quiet corner of the temple. A few monkeys hop and leap around them, chattering mischievously. Olivia & Nethra being cautious and a little scared. Birds dart between branches overhead.

As they hear the sound of water, curiosity bubbling through the group, they decide to explore the small mountain trail that begins behind the waterfall. They start climbing. The path gradually grows steeper, roots crisscrossing the ground, old trees towering like

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guardians of the forest. Tara turns back. “*Let’s go! Why did you stop?*” David breathes heavily, clutching his chest lightly, “*Guys... wait. I... I don’t feel well. I can’t seem to catch my breath.*” Olivia, alarmed, “*What happened? Are you okay?*” Hazel steps forward immediately, concern etched on her face, “*Sit down for a moment. Do you need water?*” She passes a bottle. Nethra takes it and gently kneels beside him, “*Here... drink slowly.*” He sips, gulps of air coming in shaky breaths. After a few moments, he nods, “*I’m okay,*” he says softly. “*Just... overwhelmed, I guess.*” They continue trekking, moving more slowly now. The forest grows denser, greener, and older. Someone spots a massive tree root twisted like a sculpture. And someone takes a selfie with the mountain cliff behind them.

Ahead, on flat rocks beneath the shade of enormous trees, sit several Sadhus (Saints). Long matted hair, saffron clothes. Their ages seem unimaginable, some look a hundred, some even older. As the group walks past quietly, one elderly Sadhu, thin, eyes glowing like embers, raises his head and gives Hazel a warm smile. Then he gently beckons her. Hazel pauses, uncertain, then steps closer. She bends slightly to hear him. The sadhu joins his palms in a respectful namaskar before speaking, his voice soft but firm. “*Child... meet me after the darshan of Jwala Narasimha Swamy.*” Hazel freezes. Her eyes widened slightly. “*Uh... okay. Sure,*” she whispers, unsure if she imagined the moment. She steps back towards the group. Hudson notices immediately. Hudson, brows drawn, concerned, tightening his voice: “*Haz... what did he say?*”

Hazel looks ahead, still processing. *"I... I don't know. But he wants me to meet him later."* His face tightens with worry.

As they continue trekking slowly, Kathy asks gently, *"What did your dad say when you called him?"* David looks down, carefully watching his steps. *"He told me the truth."* Tara, walking just behind him, asks softly, *"What truth?"* David exhales. *"Years ago, people from our village, including my parents, were pressured into conversion. Community leaders, political agents... they sold promises of help, votes, and a better life."* He pauses. *"And our parents believed them blindly."* Liam says quietly, *"That's colonization. A British practice, divide and rule."* Kathy looks at him. *"I'm born British,"* he says, then adds quietly, *"And I feel sorry."* David's voice cracks as he continues, *"Growing up, I was taught to hate the traditions my own ancestors followed. The pastors at my church... They said horrible things about Hindu Gods. And I believed them. I believed everyone else was wrong."*

He pauses.

Olivia blinks, *"That's madness."* *"Yes,"* he replies softly. *"Every word that I'm saying is true."* Hazel looks at Olivia in shock, *"Oli, our church fathers would never say such things. Right?"* Olivia responds, *"Absolutely, they're actually very kind towards other communities."* *"That's what I figured,"* David replies. *"You guys are friendly with everyone. You talk about culture, art, and entertainment. But ours?"* He lets out a dry laugh. *"We weren't even allowed to watch movies."*

CLUCK!

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“O... *shit*.” He slips on a soft rock. Liam grabs his arm instantly, steadying him. “*Thanks, man.*” David regains his balance and continues, his voice steadier now. “*But now... seeing all this, the temples, these mountains, the people around me, I sense as someone who is invisible is teaching me my roots. I feel like I’ve lived my whole life inside a well. Blind.*” Kathy steps closer, her voice gentle. “*It’s okay. Being a true Sanatani’s daughter, I didn’t listen to my mom my entire life either. Now I regret it.*” She gives a small smile, “*We’re actually on the same page.*” he nods, “*I get it.*” He straightens up, a new spark in his eyes. “*Alright. Let’s keep going. I want to see everything.*” Hudson grins, “*Yeah... there’s our man.*”

The group continues the trek, a quiet strength settling into their steps. Sunlight filters through the thick canopy above. They have already completed a long 6-kilometre walk through dense forested hills. Sweat glistens on their faces, breath comes heavy, legs ache, but no one complains. At one corner of the path, a serene-looking Swamiji stands calmly, watching them approach. He speaks gently, “*Before you proceed to Jwala Narasimha Swamy Temple, take the path to Ugra Stambham. There... touch the Swamy Paadam. His divine footprints still bless that mountain.*” Nethra mutters softly to herself, half-dramatic, “*More climbing? I need a bottle of cold coffee or fruit salad. I’ll eat that and sleep on this rock...*” Hazel smiles, “*Let’s rest for five minutes. Then we start.*” A stranger passing by adds casually, “*The path ahead is tough. You’ll have to climb using ropes.*” Kathy’s eyes widen as she turns

to Nethra. “*Oh. Oh. Did he say ropes?*” Tara and Hazel, drenched in sweat, burst out laughing at their exchange.

They sit under a tree, sipping water, letting their breath slow. After a short rest, they rise again, this time gripping thick ropes tied from tree to tree. The slope is steep, slippery with roots and loose pebbles. Monkeys leap wildly through the branches above, curious and fearless. Trekkers descending pass them, smiling, pointing upwards. “*Govinda... Govinda...*” One trekker calls out encouragingly, “*Keep going! Just fifteen more minutes to the Swamy Paadam. Totally worth it!*”

Fifteen minutes pass. They are still climbing. They stop again, sit down for another ten minutes. No one dares to open their bags as the monkeys have claimed the hill. Nethra nudges Kathy. “*You want to look down?*” “*Nope,*” Kathy replies instantly. “*Just once. Please,*” Nethra insists. Hudson laughs at them, then he looks down, “*Wow... it’s beautiful.*” He turns to Kathy, “*Hey, you have to look down. It’s beautiful.*” Kathy takes a deep breath, grips the rope tighter, and finally looks. “*Wow... wow.*” “*Govinda!*” Hudson suddenly shouts. Everyone echoes, “*Goooovinda!*” “One more time, *Govindaaa!*” Hudson yells. Nearby trekkers too join in this time, “*Goooovinda!*”

Holding the rope firmly with his left hand, Hudson raises his voice this time, “*Again... Govindaaa!*” “*Goooovinda!*” The chant roars, louder this time,

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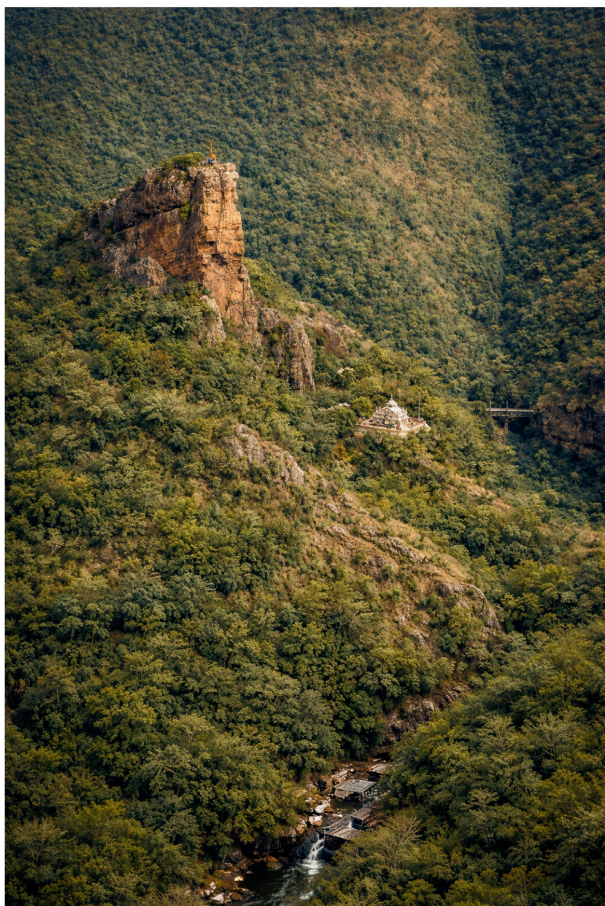
Ugra Stambham view while trekking.

echoing through the hills. Fueled by the sound, they push through the final stretch. Ten more minutes. Sweat dripping. Muscles burning. And then, they arrive.

The Ugra Stambham rises before them, a massive, jagged pillar of rock, raw and untamed. At its edge, nestled quietly into the stone, lies the Swamy Paadam. Everyone removes their footwear. Slowly, reverently, they step forward. Hazel kneels first, gently touches the sacred footprints, folds her hands, and bows her head in namaskar, silently thanking her Poppy. Gratitude fills her chest, steady and overwhelming. One by one, the others step forward, resting their fingers on the stone where Lord Narasimha's feet are believed to have touched. Eyes close. Lips move in silent prayer. They all can feel it, something sacred. They sit together afterwards, letting the moment settle. The wind howls around them, rushing through the mountains like a celestial chant.

Hudson exhales, awed. *"Damn... looking at these mountains, it feels like we're characters in Game of Thrones or something epic."* Liam, exhausted but smiling, nods, *"Yeah mate. Totally!"* They sit quietly, absorbing the stillness. Olivia leans closer to Hazel and whispers, *"Haz... it's so peaceful here."* Hazel nods, meeting her gaze. There's a pause. Olivia's eyes welled up, *"You took care of me when I was deeply depressed... mentally disturbed."* She grips Hazel's hand, *"I never thought I'd come out of those dark thoughts. I happened to get nightmares about the kidnapper... the whole*

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Aerial view of Eguva Ahobilam.

situation, almost every night."

Her voice trembles, *"Even when this journey started, he was still in my mind. But as the trip went on... I'm now able to look at life from a new perspective."* She swallows, *"I think this trip gave me a fresh start."* *"And I give all the credit to you, Haz. You did this. I can't thank you enough for making this happen."* She pulls Hazel into a tight hug.

Hazel stands still for a moment, stunned, then wraps her arms around her. *"I couldn't watch you suffer, Oli."* Hudson and Liam step in, joining the hug. A quiet, beautiful circle forms, no words, just presence. The others watch from a distance, smiles soft, hearts full. Not too far from them, an old man sits perched on a smooth rock, leaning on a wooden stick, his gaze fixed on the mountains. Hearing footsteps, he slowly turns his head, his eyes settling on Kathy and David.

The old man, calm and reverent, *"You are standing on history, children. This is where it happened. From this very Stambham, the Lord emerged to protect Prahlada and destroy Hiranyakashipu."* He touches the ground with his fingers. *"Right here... Vishnu Bhagwan, in the form of Narasimha, walked the Earth."* The words settle around the group like a sacred hush. No one speaks. The old man shifts slightly, tapping the earth with his stick. *"Without a purpose, none can reach here. The mountain does not call to all, only to those destined to hear something."*

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Each one of them feels it, a strange pull. Olivia's eyes suddenly widen. She turns to Tara, *"Tara... why did you choose Ahobilam, honestly?"* She smiles softly, brushing windblown hair from her face. *"My dad got enlightened here. He always told me, 'If life ever confuses you, go to Ahobilam.' I was in a bad state last month, so when he suggested this place, it excited me."* Hudson, curious, looks at Kathy, *"What about you? Why did you join the trip?"* Kathy lets out a small laugh, half confused, half sincere, *"Honestly? I ask myself the same question. I don't even follow God. I challenged my mom that I wouldn't fall for the word destiny. Yet somehow, I ended up coming all the way here. And now... I'm a changed person."* She glances at the mountains, almost baffled, *"How did I travel this far? I have no idea."*

Tara then looks at Olivia with gentle seriousness. *"And what's your purpose?"* Olivia takes a deep, steady breath, *"I... went through something really bad back home. I fell into depression. I told my dad I needed to go far away, somewhere I could become myself again."*

Before she finishes, Liam speaks up without hesitation, *"Honestly, I have three reasons. One, back home, my days were just routine. I wanted a good story in my life, something I could be proud of. Two, I wanted to be part of Hazel's adventure. She's unbelievable."* He hugs her sideways, *"And three, we all wanted to see Oli happy again."* Hudson nods immediately, *"Yeah. We wanted to help her come out of that dark phase."*

Nethra turns to Hazel, *"For a long time, I've been*

reading the journal. Ahobilam stayed in my mind, it kept pulling me here. And..." She smiles at Olivia, *"I wanted Oli to be with me."*

Liam looks at David. *"What's your purpose?"* David looks down at his hands, then slowly looks up. *"Ever since I opened up about my past, I told myself I needed one good reason to come out of it. Maybe... that reason is here."* They look at each other, realising something profound. Everyone has a reason. A purpose.

Hudson suddenly raises his hand, remembering something, *"Wait! What about Hari? What's your purpose?"* Everyone turns to Hari, who sits comfortably on a rock, smiling at the attention. He starts saying, *"Well... when Naarayan told me how deeply you were interested in this place, Sameera and I wanted to help. We felt like maybe we could make things easier for you."* He pauses, then chuckles. *"But the real surprise? My close friend Thanvith calls me out of nowhere and says his sister, Tara, is planning a trip to Ahobilam with her colleagues. And he wants me to help them."* *"And we think... why not just join the groups together?"* *"I feel so blessed to be the chariot of this journey. Maybe it's my destiny to be part of yours."* The whole group exchanges smiles.

Slowly, they sip the last of their water, gather their strength, and rise to begin the descent. The trail looks harmless from above, but the moment they take the first few steps, reality hits. Climbing down is far crueller than climbing up. Calves tremble, thighs burn,

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and every step sends a tiny shock through their knees. Hudson grunts, "Bro... I swear my legs are talking to me right now." Kathy laughs breathlessly, "Same. My muscles are filing complaints."

They keep going, one careful step at a time, gripping branches and rocks for balance. After a slow, painful thirty minutes, they finally stop.

Panting, they collapse onto a wide rock shaded by a tall tree. No one talks for a moment; they're too busy breathing. Tara, rubbing her calves: *"I can't feel my legs... is this normal?"* David wipes sweat from his forehead. *"Guys... I want to share something. Something I haven't told anyone yet."* The group straightens up, curious.

Tara, *"Go on..."* Kathy, *"You're being very... cinematic right now."* Hudson, with curiosity, asks, *"What is it, bro?"* He takes a breath. *"I know this sounds crazy. But the truth is... my real name is not David. It's.... Narasimhulu."*

There's a pause.

Everyone overlaps: *"What?!"* *"Wait a minute, what do you mean?"* *"Narasimhulu?? As in..."* He nods slowly, *"Yes. Narasimhulu. That's the name my grandmother gave me when I was born."*

"But ever since I was a child, at church, at school, even on my ID cards, I've been called David." *"And ever since Nethra and I argued... It's been ringing in my head."*

Loudly. Softly, he adds looking at her, “*I told you, right? I too had doubts. I never forgot. I just... buried it.*” Hari, curious: “*Sorry to ask... is this because of conversion?*” He nods, “*Yeah. That’s what I spoke to my dad about yesterday.*” Kathy, quietly: “*I don’t get it?*” Nethra asks gently, “*So... you have two names. Two identities?*” “*No. My original name was hidden,*” he says. Nethra softly said, “*We totally understand.*” He looks lighter, relieved, like someone finally heard him. She shakes her head slowly. “*I still can’t believe the coincidence. Revealing your original name here, in this very place...*”

Kathy teases him, smiling, “*So what now? Do we have to call you Narasimhulu?*” He grows shy. Everyone laughs. She pats his shoulder, “*Don’t worry. Feel good about it.*” They sit quietly for ten minutes, catching their breath, before continuing down a steep patch.

Suddenly, Mukund’s foot slips on a mossy stone, “*Whoaaa!*” By instinct, Tara grabs his arm and holds onto the rope line, steadying them both. Tara firmly says, “*Careful!*” Mukund chuckles, slightly breathless, “*That was close. Thanks, madam.*” Nethra turns to Kathy, “*You see that? That’s how you need to grab me. Quick.*” Kathy laughs, “*Eat more junk, baby. Even if I grab you, you’ll fall anyway.*” Everyone laughs.

They finally reach the Jwala Narasimha Swamy Temple, nestled in a natural cradle of rock and forest. One tourist says, “*They say this is where His fury burst into flames.*” Kathy looks around, touching the railing

as she walks. *“Wow... I love this narrow way.”* They step forward slowly, take darshan, sip the theertham with excitement, and Liam asks the priest about the temple’s story. The priest responds warmly, *“I’m happy to answer, dear. Jwala Narasimha Swamy Temple is at the highest peak of Ahobilam. I know you all risked your lives to reach here.”* He continues, pointing, *“The waterfall you see there, it flows all 365 days.”* Then he gestures to a small pond on the left side of the temple. *“This is Rakta Gundam. This is where Swamy washed his hands after killing the evil king.”* Everyone leans forward, quietly looking at the pond.

Everyone slips their footwear back on and begins descending slowly, legs still trembling. As they follow the narrow path downward, Hazel suddenly pauses. To the left, half-hidden behind rocks and hanging roots, is a small cave that everyone can see. Inside, sitting calmly with his wooden staff, is the same old Sadhu who spoke to her earlier. She realises it instantly. Without a word, she walks towards him and folds her hands. The rest of the group quietly follows.

The Sadhu lifts his head, *“Why did you come from such a long distance, child?”* She says, *“Well, my great-great-grandfather came here once... he wrote about this place. He said he felt the presence of God.”* Sadhu studies her face. *“Well... did you?”* Hazel’s voice trembles slightly. *“Yes, I did!”* she responds. The Sadhu nods slowly. Then, with careful, deliberate movements, he reaches into a small sanchi beside him. He retrieves a folded, time-worn photograph and places it in Hazel’s hands.

She unfolds it... and gasps.

In the photo stands her poppy, younger, smiling, next to an Indian man, both standing on the very same mountainside where she is today. On the back, written in faded ink, are the words: ‘*Photo taken by Richard – 1876.*’ Hazel presses her fingers over her poppy’s face, tears filling her eyes. Her voice breaks. “*Sir... this is my poppy.*” Sadhu gently points to the Indian man. “*And that... is my grandfather,*” he smiles.

The entire group freezes in shock. Hudson, Liam, Olivia, Hari, and the others rush closer, crowding around Hazel. Hudson quickly takes a photo of the picture with his phone before she returns it respectfully. Olivia wipes her own tears, overwhelmed by Hazel’s joy and the destiny unfolding before her eyes. Hazel looks at Sadhu, her breath shaky. “*How... how did you know it was me?*” she asks. Sadhu smirks lightly, teasingly, “*I just know... no questions,*” he says.

He then turns to the rest of the group, his gaze sharp, reading each of them effortlessly. “*Questions about life... regret from living with lies, fear of facing a challenge...*” Narasimha (David) stiffens, shocked. He looks at Nethra and whispers, “*How does he know?*” Then Sadhu continues, “*Listen, all of you... we are just playing roles: a son, a daughter, a student, a friend, a lover, a guru, and so on. We must give love, time, and care to nature. Giving itself is the characteristic of God. Do not expect anything in return. That is where the pain begins. At the right time, the universe will do the rest.*”

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He pauses. The mountain air falls completely silent. Even nearby tourists and vendors turn to the cave, listening. He continues, *“No one here can promise that we will stay on this planet forever. Correct?”* Everyone slowly nods in agreement. *“Our bodies die and decay. But our soul, the Atma, takes a new body after death.”* He gestures around them. *“Search for the truth, the truth you discover through your own questions, your own experiences, and your own awakening. Dig into history, the history hidden in culture, in Ithihasas. The past holds clues to who we are and who we must become.”* He adds, *“Search for the ultimate purpose of your life. Every soul carries a unique path, a reason it takes birth in this age, and a mission only it can fulfil. Question yourself.”*

He then looks at Narasimha and says, *“Find out what your **Gothram** is. That is your primary concern.”* Nethra looks at him with a surprised smile. Then he looks at Kathy and Hudson. *“And this land... is not ordinary. This is from Satya Yuga: 2.16 million years old.”* *“I know it is hard to believe for your generation, but you should accept that we are all living on a floating rock in dark space. Isn’t it?”* he asks, looking at everyone listening. *“If that is believable, then... all this is...”*

Sadhu stands up slowly, resting on his wooden staff. *“These mountains carry great power.”* Looking deeply at them, he says, *“**Dharmo Rakshati Rakshitaha.**”* He folds his hands and says, *“**Lakshmi Narasimha Swamyee Namaha.**”* He blesses each one gently with his hand... and then walks away slowly. The group stands frozen in awe.

As they slowly and silently begin their descent down the hill, Hudson turns to Narasimha and asks, *"What is Gothram? I didn't get that."* Nethra hesitates, *"How do I explain this... ahh..."* Before she can continue, Tara steps in, *"It's your father's ancestral line."* *"Right,"* Nethra reacts. *"I still didn't get that,"* Liam says. *"Me neither,"* Hudson adds. Hari joins in, *"It's like an ancient family identity. It shows which rishi(sage) your family originally descended from."* *"Wow,"* Hudson breathes out. *"And it's passed down from father to children,"* Hari continues. Narasimha looks at him curiously, *"Anna, how do I know my Gothram?"* *"Simple,"* Hari replies. *"Ask your dad. If he doesn't remember, someone in your dad's family will."*

Hours later, they finally reach the base and walk back to the rooms, sweat-drenched. By the time they settle into the restaurant, it's already 3 p.m. Plates of hot rice, dal, sabzi, and curd land in front of them, and everyone digs in with the hunger of people who've climbed a lifetime. They eat until their plates are clean and their souls feel full. By the end of the meal, every face around the table looks satisfied. Slowly, one by one, they drift back to the beds. But by evening, reality hits, their legs ache. Not waiting even a second, Narasimha stands up, with determination in his eyes. *"Guys... I'll go to my hometown directly from here. Don't mind. I have an important thing to deal with my parents."* Tara nods gently. *"Sure."* Kathy and Nethra, already sensing the shift in him, hand over a bundle, neatly wrapped in old newspaper.

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Nethra says, “*Here. This is for you and your family.*” He looks touched. “*Can I open it now?*” Kathy smiles. “*Yeah, sure.*” Hazel and Liam stand beside him, quietly watching. He unwraps it slowly. Inside is a photo of Laxmi Narasimha Swamy and a collection of books, simple, traditional guides on poojas, vratas, and daily rituals. Books that houses in India have treasured for generations. He holds them carefully. Narasimha feels grateful, “*Thank you, guys... I’ll give them to my mother.*” Kathy replies, “*Always.*” Mukund says, “*I’ll drop you off at the bus stop.*”

Narasimha nods and goes inside to pack. He folds his clothes quickly, but with an unusual calmness. When he steps out with his bag, the Americans gather around him, each giving him a warm hug. Hudson pats his back. Liam squeezes his shoulder. Hazel smiles with pride, says, “*What a journey! You have an inspiring story to tell your next generation.*” He smiles in agreement. Olivia whispers, “*You got this, buddy.*”

Meanwhile, Tara, Kathy, and Nethra sit under a big neem tree, watching everything unfold. Mukund waits in the driver’s seat of the van. Narasimha walks to the girls, he smiles and says softly, “*Thank you for this wonderful experience.*” They smile back, proud of him. He gets inside the van. He turns back, their smile reaching his eyes.

In the distance, Olivia looks at Hazel and says, “*I’m lucky to have you as my closest friend, Haz... this journey, this is a lifetime achievement. Love you, babe.*”

She pulls Hazel into a tight hug. Hazel smiles and hugs her back, just beside Hudson and Liam watches a group of monkeys jumping wildly from one tree to another.

Hudson, hands in his pockets, lets out a long breath. *“God... I’m gonna miss this place.”* Liam says, *“Yeah... me too.”* Hudson nudges Liam with a small grin. *“Let’s plan another trip, this time with Clara and June.”* He throws a playful wink. Liam’s face lights up immediately, imagining it, but he says, *“We’ve got bills to pay, man... and a big debt too.”* Hudson elbows him jokingly in the ribs, *“You don’t give me a chance to imagine stuff.”* Liam reacts, *“Ow, bro!”* Hudson laughs as Liam shoves him back lightly, both smile.

Minutes later, Mukund returns from the bus stop. For about an hour and a half, they all take rest and later, slowly start packing their bags, getting ready for their return. They post pictures on Instagram tagging each other.

Everyone waits with their bags lined up beside them. They share a round of warm, tired hugs, and quiet. No words needed. One by one, they climb into the van. They are still exhausted. The moment the engine starts humming, everyone drifts into silence, heads leaning on windows, seats, or each other. Sleep takes over almost instantly.

Except Hazel. She sits near the window, eyes tracing the fading mountains. Softly, she murmurs to the sky,

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“Thanks, Poppy... you gave me clarity in life. Your ambition to change people’s mindsets... it became true today.” She smiles faintly, then continues in her thoughts, *“We overthink life so much... we make it heavier than it needs to be. But stepping out, taking risks, going on adventures, that’s when we understand what we really want.”* *“Indians... they are the happiest people I’ve seen. They love their Gods, they love their culture, they love their traditions... and they never let go of what’s theirs. Such a rich culture.”* Her eyelids grow heavy. Hazel finally falls asleep.

The next day

Tara returns home, hugs her mom and dad, and says, *“This is the best trip ever.!”* continues talking to them about what all that happened in the journey.

Kathy reaches home, hugs her mother, and says, *“I’m sorry, ma. Thank you for always holding me and teaching me about our culture. I think I’m a new person now. It’s the greatest place ever. Next time, I will take you to all the spiritual places.”* Her mother feels happy seeing her daughter change.

Nethra runs to her grandmother, takes her blessings, and hugs her. She tells her stories of each individual and their learnings during the journey. She then waits for her mother, sitting near the steps at the main door. Around 6:45 p.m., her mother arrives. Nethra hugs her

tightly and says, “*I missed you, Amma.*” She restarts telling stories from her journey and finally stops around midnight. She sleeps peacefully on her mother’s shoulder, holding her hand tightly.

Narasimha knocks on the door. His mother opens it and looks at him. He touches her feet, takes her blessings and then hugs her. She looks at him, surprised. His dad and uncle are already at home. They stare at him in shock. His uncle asks his dad, “*Why is your son behaving like this?*” pointing to his forehead as Narasimha applies kumkum. His dad asks, “*What happened, Babu?*” His uncle says, “*David, why did you commit this sin?*” His mother just stares at him. Narasimha looks at his dad, says proudly, “*I’m no longer David, nanna. My name is Narasimha. Grandma named me, remember?*” he asks.

His uncle shouts, “*This is purely against our culture.*” His mother’s eyes fill with tears as she looks at his uncle with rage. Narasimha questions his uncle, “*What culture? You tell me, I’ll listen.*” He continues, “*I just witnessed our original history with my own eyes. Do you even know what exists outside your world?*” Turning to his mother, he says, “*We have lived our lives in four-walls for decades. But... I am breaking that wall and taking my family on the right path.*”

He takes the photo of Narasimha swamy from his bag and places it on the rack. He gives the slokas and vratam books to his mother and says, “*We need to rebuild our real culture.*” He hands her the diya to light.

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His mother, with tears of joy, gets up, ties her hair, picks up the matchbox from the floor, lights the diya, and applies kumkum on her forehead and on his father's. His father smiles, seeing his wife with kumkum and his son's confident tone.

“*Nanna!!*” Narasimha calls. His dad looks at him. “*Do you remember our Gothram?*” Narasimha asks. His dad looks puzzled, unable to recollect. “*Bharadwaja,*” his mother answers without blinking. His uncle shouts at her, “*Shut up!*” His dad turns to him and says firmly, “*Either leave, or we may have to make you leave.*” His uncle leaves the house in anger. The family hugs each other. “*Thanks, kanna,*” his mother says. His dad asks her, “*How did you remember?*” “*I heard it during our marriage and vratham,*” she replies with a smile. They hug each other again.

Meanwhile, the Americans are back at their hotel in Hyderabad, with nine more days left to explore. They are already missing their Indian friends. Just then, a message pops up in Destiny.

It's from Hari: a document file.

Liam opens it, “*Wow... what a surprise... Hari and Sameera are getting married in two days! Guys, look at this!*” Everyone gathers around, surprised and excited. They immediately start typing messages, congratulating the couple with big smiles.

And so, they all meet again...

The End

Bhagavad Gita (Chapter 7, Verse 4)

*bhūmir āpo 'nalo vāyuh khaṁ mano
buddhir eva ca |
ahaṅkāra itīyaṁ me bhinnā prakṛtir
aṣṭadhā ||*

Krishna in Vishwaroopam, explains that the basic elements of nature are divine energies (Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Space, Mind, Intellect and Ego). Respecting and protecting these elements is therefore respecting the divine creation.

WHAT LIES BEYOND!

Nava Narasimha Kshetrams

1. Jwala Narasimha
2. Ahobila Narasimha
3. Malola Narasimha
4. Varaha Narasimha
5. Karanja Narasimha
6. Bhargava Narasimha
7. Yogananda Narasimha
8. Chatravata Narasimha
9. Pavana Narasimha

Places Of Interest

- A. Ugra Stambham
- B. Bhavanashini River
- C. Prahaladha badi
- D. Lakshmi Narasimha Temple



Bhumi Prarthana Shlokam

సముద్ర వసనే దేవి పర్వత స్తన మండలే |
విష్ణు పత్నీ నమస్తుభ్యం పాద స్పర్శం క్షమస్వ మే||

ఓ దేవి, సముద్రాలను వస్త్రాలుగా ధరించినదానివి,
పర్వతాలను వక్షస్థలంగా కలిగినదానివి,
విష్ణుమూర్తి భార్యవైన భూమి దేవి! నీకు నా నమస్కారం.
నీపై నా పాదాలను ఉంచుతున్నందుకు నన్ను క్షమించు.

समुद्र वसने देवी
पर्वत स्तन मंडले।
विष्णु पत्नी नमस्तुभ्यं
पाद स्पर्श क्षमस्व मे॥

हे देवी! आप समुद्रों को वस्त्र की तरह धारण करती हैं
और पर्वत आपके वक्षस्थल हैं।
हे भगवान विष्णु की पत्नी, आपको मेरा प्रणाम।
आपको अपने पैरों से स्पर्श करने के लिए मुझे क्षमा करें।

Samudra vasane devi
Parvata sthana mandale |
Vishnu patni namastubhyam
Paada sparsham kshamasva me ||

O Goddess Earth,
who is covered by oceans and
has mountains as your bosom,
O wife of Lord Vishnu, I bow to you.
Please forgive me for touching you with my feet.

WHAT LIES BEYOND!

The Author
PAVAN KUMAAR DASARI

At Jwala Narasimha Swamy Temple,
in the serene hills of Ahobilam,
presented his first work,
“THE ECHOES OF BLOOD,”
at the feet of Swamy.

In July 2025, in that simple, sacred moment,
he received blessings, and continued his journey
as an Author.

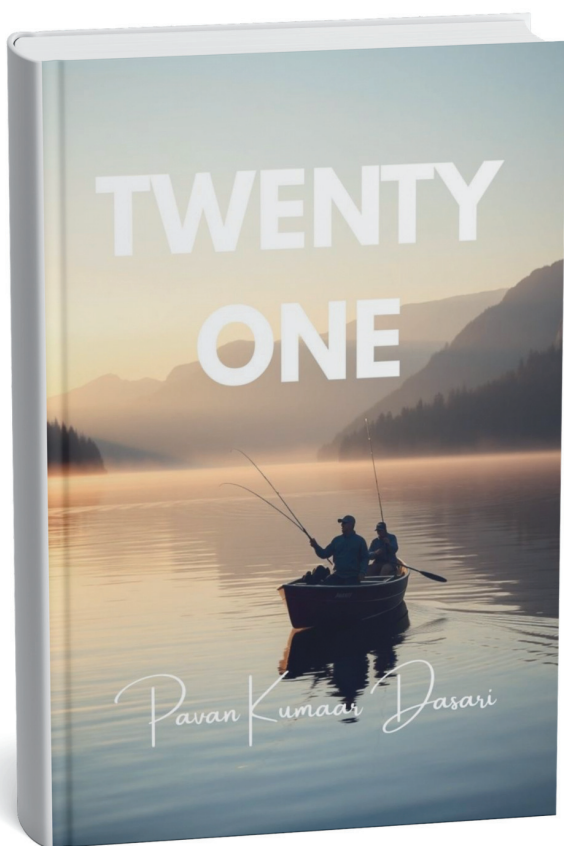


WHAT LIES BEYOND!

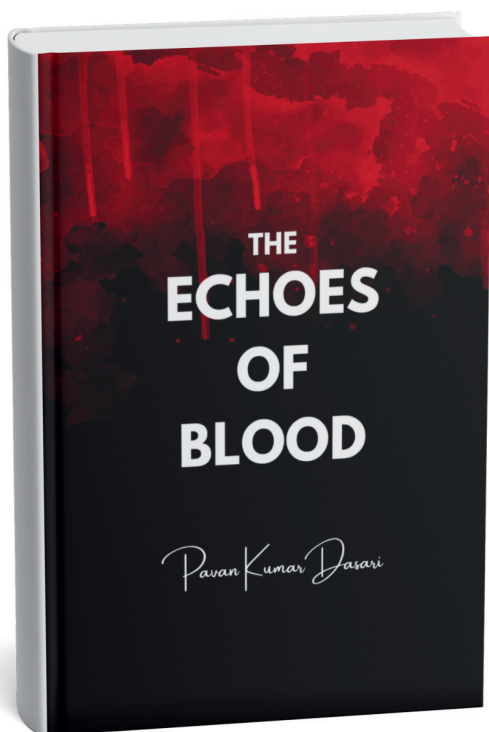
Here's a glimpse of my upcoming book,
"TWENTY ONE"

A mysterious journey of two fishermen, where the sea holds more than just tides and storms. As they set out on what seems like an ordinary voyage, they find themselves drawn into a series of strange and unsettling events, moments that blur the line between reality and the unknown. What begins as a simple journey soon turns into a test of courage, trust, and survival, as secrets surface and the ocean reveals truths they were never meant to uncover.

PAVAN KUMAAR DASARI



WHAT LIES BEYOND!



Amazon reviews for
"THE ECHOES OF BLOOD"
by Pavan Kumaar Dasari

Aakanksha

*If you are a fan of gripping thrillers and emotions
this book is a must-read.*

*“A chilling page-turner that kept me hooked till the end.
I loved the story telling and detailing of the characters.
I could picture every detail mentioned as it is.
The pacing was perfect and the ending was
the most satisfying.”*

Prathyusha

Highly recommended

*“Couldn’t stop thinking about it after I finished. This
book stayed with me long after the last page. It’s raw,
powerful, and makes you reflect deeply. You can feel the
author’s heart in every story. Truly worth reading.”*

YPS Murthy

Deeply moving and powerful.

*“Loved the storytelling, simple, emotional, and
thought-provoking. A great read!”*

Srija

*“A fantastic collection of three stories, written for all
ages. A must read. My fav is the second one.”*

Bramhani

Softly Written, Strongly Felt!!

“It stayed with me quietly and deeply. The stories unfolded gently, yet each carries an emotional depth that slowly sinks in.

The author beautifully captured strength in ordinary people, especially in moments where silence, pain, and love speak louder than words. Gentle yet powerful writing that lingered long after reading. Worth reading.”



Swetha

Strong, emotional and deeply human!!!

“ Each story is different, but they all carry the same truth: when pushed to the edge, the human heart finds its own way to fight back. Strong, emotional, and deeply human. A must-read for anyone who loves stories of courage and hope.”



Nikita

Awesome

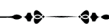
“A masterfully written book that lingered in my mind long after the final page, left me both satisfied and subtly transformed.”

Swadeep

Whispers of History, Roars of Revolution.

"The Echoes of Blood is a thrilling ode to India's buried past, a tale where history whispers through walls and blood remembers more than books. For fans of Indian history, coded mysteries, and fast-paced fiction, this is a must-read.

Forget Netflix binge, this book is the asli blockbuster. Forts, freedom, family drama - all served hot! Warning: side effects may include shouting 'Wah rey history!' at 2AM."



Hussain

"I recently finished reading this book, and I have to say, it was an outstanding read from start to finish. The writing was clear and engaging, the pacing well-balanced, and the storyline both meaningful and memorable.

What impressed me most was how effortlessly the author brought the characters and world to life. Every scene felt vivid, and there was a strong emotional pull that kept me fully invested. It's one of those books that stays with you long after you've turned the last page. A truly well-written and thoughtful piece of work. I'd highly recommend it to anyone looking for a book that not only entertains but also makes you think."

WHAT LIES BEYOND!

Dear Readers,

I hope you enjoyed the book. Thank you for reading and supporting me. I began writing in 2023. It took a lot of thought to shape and visualize every story in my mind. I'd truly appreciate your feedback, as it will help me improve my storytelling.

Kindly share with dpk.writings@gmail.com.

Thank you,
Pavan Kumaar Dasari

The tracks below are part of the world of
WHAT LIES BEYOND!
the same music your characters lived, felt,
and remembered.

Listen along by scanning the QR code, and
step back into their journey.



1. *Veena*
2. *Wake Me Up When September Ends* – Green Day
3. *Complicated* – Avril Lavigne
4. *Careless Whisper* – George Michael
5. *Calma* – Pedro Capó
6. *Perfect* – Ed Sheeran
7. *You're Beautiful* – James Blunt
8. *APT* – ROSÉ & Bruno Mars
9. *Hanuman Mantra*
10. *Naatu Naatu* – RRR (Movie)
11. *Levitating* – Dua Lipa
12. *Maari Thara Local* – Maari (Movie)
13. *Kala Chashma* – Baar Baar Dekho (Movie)
14. *Uptown Funk* – Mark Ronson ft. Bruno Mars
15. *Makeba* – Jain
16. *Stayin' Alive* – Bee Gees
17. *Run It Up* – Hanumankind
18. *Puthiyoru Lokam* – Hridayam (Movie)