

WHERE GRADES ARE BOUGHT AND COURAGE IS FREE

STUDENTS' STRIKE

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This book is dedicated to those who rebel not for chaos, but for change.

To those who were told that they were too relentless.

Too loud? Too bold? Or just too much?

-Perfect. Stay that way.

*And most importantly, to those who were told to bite their tongues, sit
down and shut up...*

Here's a whole damn book they can't ignore.

Trigger warning: This book contains unfiltered truths and unapologetic rebellion. If you fear change more than ignorance, put the book down.

I'm afraid you'll choke on every single word.

PROLOGUE

The Rebels

According to the Rebels, school stands for:

Seven

Cruel

Hours

Of

Our

Lives.

The Rebels are the only ones who can make the Cruel hours fun, mischievous and somewhat survivable.

Well, the thing is that I'm actually *a part of this girl's gang*. They are my ride-or-die besties.

And before I go ranting on like I'm the main character, let me introduce the rest of the squad.

Let's start with Preeti Sharma—aka CHICA. Tiny in height, colossal in laughter. She could make even the strictest history teacher crack a smile.

We first met in second grade. Our grumpy teacher had us all standing because apparently, speaking anything but English was a crime, even if we were seven-year-olds.

During that stiff silence, Preeti muttered a one-liner in *Hindi*—I can't even remember exactly what it was—

but it hit the teacher like a lightning bolt. He tried to keep his usual stone-cold stare... and failed spectacularly. He laughed. Loudly. We had never seen him laugh or even smile before that.

We got punished twice that day but it was totally worth it. That's also when we became besties. And now? She's my oldest friend.

Secondly, on my bestie-list is Mira Tripathi.

Mini, Munchkin, Muchacho. She has a lot of nicknames. But what *we* call her is MOMO.

She is the foodie and also a moody. She is capable of hiding her very own banquet hall under her classroom table. Once, I swear she pulled out samosas, chips and a juice box during Health Physical Education theory class. And the funny part about her slyness is that she never gets caught somehow.

Besides being good at wit, she's also incredible with numbers. Just last year, Mrs. Deepti, our math teacher hated her bob haircut because she wanted all girls to make two braided ponytails at all times.

Mrs. Deepti challenged her with ninth grade algebra questions as a punishment. She wanted to humiliate her in front of the class but Mira answered them all quite proficiently while the teacher herself made a calculation mistake. But instead of being impressed, Mrs. Deepti started to despise her. I believe, she still does.

I've known Mira only since sixth grade. She got admission in Regent's Heights in fifth grade but it was the

time when we took online classes, locked in our own houses.

Last but not least is Dharvi Garg.

She rocks in a pixie cut so, the new teachers always mistake her for a boy.

But the Rebels don't think that Dharvi looks like a boy. In our opinion, if you look closely, she looks like an ostrich. That's why her nickname is OSTRICH. It's not like she is very tall (she has an average height, a little bit taller than Mira) but it's because... once you see it, you can't unsee it.

She's unbeatable at sports, throwing crazy house parties and mimicking different voices. All while never hurting anyone. But she messes up in weird ways which we could recall hundreds of times and still choke on laughter.

Like, in sixth grade, she once stole all the board markers and hid them so that the class teacher wouldn't take the test. Little did she know, the teacher had premade questionnaires.

Amongst my friends and classmates, I'm the tallest girl. I always stand last in queues, class photographs, assemblies, etc. And I *hate* it.

Speaking of which, I must introduce myself too.

I am Tavisha. The Rebels call me TROUBLE.

Also, as you can see, I wrote this book. It's my ideas and opinions in the form of ink and paper.

I'm a student in the story and also in real life. So, beware... you might just relate to me.

Even if don't agree with me, it's fine. But just remember- Every rulebook seems harmless until it starts to steal *your* freedom... Every rulebook is written with calm hands but signed in stolen voices.

Everything in here? Some of it's true.

Some of it ... the things that aren't true are the things that the Rebels *want* to do. I'm sure other students might want too, but let's be honest, none of us have the guts to do them.

Either way- this is our story. The chaos, the cracks in the system, the whispered plans, the laughter we weren't supposed to be laughing.

Maintaining a student and an author life all year long was exhausting.

But being silent in a place that tries to shrink you- That's worse.

So here we are.

The Rebels.

Breaking the system.

One page at a time.



STUDENTS' STRIKE

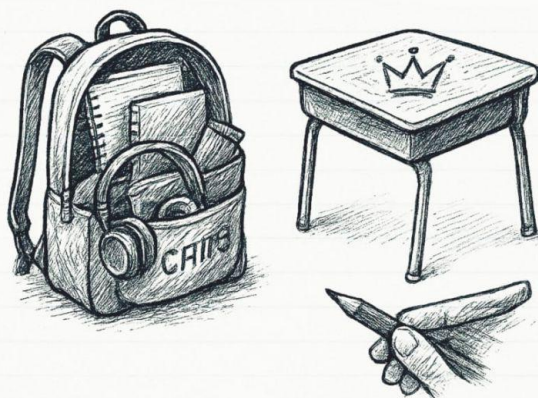


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Chapter 1

Buckle up, bevy. The gang's back.

Nervous excitement is punching through my sleepdeprived brain like a triple shot of espresso.

Although I slept only for three hours, I am ready in crisp uniform, polished shoes and enough adrenaline that could fuel an aircraft.

“Are you sure you got everything?” asks my mother. Her tone reminds me of the last scene of that movie where the main character begins a life-changing journey.

“Yep,” I reply as I rush towards the main door.

“Alright then. Bye!” She puts on one of those mom-smiles and waves her hand.

I wave back.

“And work harder this time to top the class again!” She calls out. I wave another hand and head to the bus stop.

Soon I'm in my school bus. I head toward the good old first seat where I sit with my younger brother. The weather is really cloudy today and I feel like it's replicating my mood.

One of my friends, Lavina Gupta sits just behind me.

“Hi Manchurian! I missed you during vacations.” I say shaking her hand. I call her ‘Manchurian’ because she looks like a really cute Chinese teddy doll.

“I like being missed, and by the way, I missed you too,” she replies in a half-laughing voice.

I look around. “Where is Shanaya?” I ask.

“She is on leave,” she replies.

“Leave? On day one?”

“Yeah, I know it’s weird. Shanaya never misses anything. Not for the studies but for the gossip rather.” She laughs.

It really is weird. I cannot imagine being absent on the first day of school.

“So anyways... how did you spend March?” Lavina asks and soon we are wrapped up in a conversation, catching up on how we spent the holiday time. The kind of talk that makes you forget school bells exist.

— — — — —

As soon as the bus enters Regent’s Heights school gates, reality slaps with a grin. The same building, same corridors, same uniforms, same weird smell of cheap soap and packed parathas.

I just hope this year is different from the previous one at least.

If I was walking with the Rebels right now, we'd walk in like we own the place. Or maybe like it'll bite us. I'm not sure. That weird cocktail of nerves and caffeine seems to be doing cartwheels in my stomach.

In order to get to my class, I will have to climb up three floors. My bag is as heavy as a sack of rocks. When we finally reach the top floor, Lavina is out of breath but I'm so excited that I can hardly breathe at all.

We move around the corridor trying to find our classes. There is a new sort of hustle in the school.

Every now and then a group of giggling girls passes by us. They are so different than my group with girly behavior. Not like I have any problem with that, but it somewhat reminds me of Jiya... before she left the school.

In all four of the Rebels, I'm the only one who is not a tomboy. In any other group, that fact would make me feel like the odd one out but this group is really a special one.

"There is A... This is B... That is C. Eighth C!" Lavina points toward her new classroom. "Okay then, bye, Tavisha. I'll see you after school." She gives me a high-five.

"Good luck," I smile.

"Same to you." She heads towards her class.

Now it's my turn to locate my class.

Eighth C... D... E... and.... F!

Eighth F, the meanest and most ill-disciplined class in all the eight sections. We made a new school record last year as the first class to be bestowed with ‘*The rotten class of the year*’ title seven times in a row for the past seven years.

At the classroom door, Dharvi is scanning the hallway like a predator. She is looking for someone when she notices me coming.

“Look who survived the vacations without getting arrested.” She laughs giving me a slight punch on the back of my shoulder. I suppose that ‘someone’ was me.

I’m about to reply when a classmate- Reet, pushes past her without apologizing. Dharvi gives her a death stare that’s even more terrifying with her pale complexion and dark eyes. That girl’s stunning but scary.

“S-sorry.” Reet says hesitantly.

Dharvi drops the stare like it was never even there. “Nah, it’s cool, bro.” And makes a peace sign with two of her fingers.

“Anyways, how’s it going?” Dharvi turns towards me, smiling.

I smirk. “Great. I’m trying this new thing called ‘*not overthinking everything*’.” I say with finger quotes. “What about you?”

“I miss being on vacations. This place is turning into a commotion sandwich with zero sauce,” she says.

“What’s new about that?” I scoff.

“Welllllll...” She practically sings the word, “First of all, our new class teacher is Mrs. Vaishali Batra.”

“The Math teacher?” I ask.

“Yes,” she replies.

“But she straight up gives off prison warden vibes. And she even teaches the subject nightmares are made of.” My smile is completely gone now.

Dharvi frowns. “Yeah, and I’ve heard that she was deliberately made our class teacher for the year to keep our class in line.”

I bite my lip. “Whatever happens, there’s no chance that the rotten class for seven years won’t be rotten anymore.”

“We will probably graduate rotten.” Dharvi laughs.

I pause to think for a moment. “If we’re getting a strict teacher this semester, she would definitely target one of the Rebels. It’s mostly Mira though. She’s too straightforward.” I say, giggling.

Dharvi coughs out a laugh. “Yeah, like Mrs. Deepti did last year. That girl’s got some problems with math teachers.”

I smirk. “Anyways, I guess we can’t really do anything about Vaishali mam now.”

“Yeah, but that’s not all, bro. They said that there are going to be no H.P.E periods even if any *one* of us will

not complete his or her notebook,” Dharvi says fixing her pixie hair.

“Of every subject?” I ask.

“Yes, of every subject.”

“But there are so many students who don’t even bother to *purchase* notebooks in the first place. Why are they going to punish the entire class?”

She shrugs. “They’ll just make us sit on hot ground for forty-five minutes and call it ‘theory class’.” She rolls her eyes.

We are off to a bad start but it’s going to be fine... right?

“Anyways, do you know how to build a tie?” Dharvi asks, handing me an untied blue and white striped school tie.

“Unfortunately, not. Besides, it’s ‘tie a tie’, not ‘build a tie’.”

She smirks. “So... you tie a tie by tying the tie?”

I blink blankly. “I don’t know how to tie a tie.”

She gives me a tight smile. “Eh, whatever.”

I take a look around the classroom. Half of the students have already come.

“Get off this seat at once!” Sakshi barks at Reet. Poor Reet, soft students like her don’t deserve to be placed in sections like F.

Arun throws a paper ball at Reet while Sakshi continues to shout.

Divyansh yawns- “Shut up, Sakshi. It’s seven-twenty in the morning for god’s sake!”

Sakshi rolls her eyes as she throws her bag on the seat that was previously Reet’s.

Simran enters and sits beside her. “*Hi, bestie,*” she says in an artificially sweet voice. Dharvi gags.

Sanika and Nandini are about to sit on the last bench of the fourth row, next to the window but they startle when Arun shouts- “Stop! That bench is haunted!”

Nandini raises an eyebrow. Sanika replies- “No, it’s not, Arun.”

“Yes, it is,” Yash replies as he eyes Arun with a smirk.

“Leave it, we’re sitting,” Nandini sits on it with Sanika.

Dharvi grins beside me. “Oh, shit. This is going to be epic.”

I don’t understand what she means until around twenty paper balls are thrown at their desk in a row within seconds.

Arun and his friends- Kritika, Yash, Tushar, Kunal and Vedant, all attack those girls with paper.

Vedant makes the paper balls while others throw them. “Hurry up, loser!” Yash shouts at him.

Sanika and Nandini throw them back. And soon, the neatly tidied classroom turns into a battlefield of paper balls.

A few balls hit me and Dharvi so we join the fight for entertainment. “Day one hasn’t even started yet,” Dharvi says, wheezing with laughter.

Now there are maybe fifty to sixty paper balls being used as weapons.

One of the balls also hit Nysa. She hisses like a snake and flips over the ‘haunted’ desk that Sanika and Nandini were using as a cover.

The fight comes to a stop. “Beep! The haunted desk has been demolished by Nasty Nysa,” Arun shouts.

I snort out a laugh. “Look at the classroom floor.” Dharvi giggles.

As we’re talking, another one of the Rebels struts into the classroom.

“Hey! Chica!” Me and Dharvi wave at her.

Preeti’s face lights up as she spots us and walks toward us like a model cat walking on a run way.

Drama queen as always. Fashionista and pretty. Effortlessly getting eyes on her. Mostly the four pairs of jealous eyes of the Sakshi group sitting in a corner. *The witches.*

“Yo, bro!” Dharvi greets her. “How’s it going?”

Preeti shrugs. "It's going... somewhere. Probably detention."

I smile. "How were the vacations?"

"Fab, I'm ready for a hot-girl-new-session-era." She giggles jokingly. "How do I look, Trouble?"

She looks the same. But, to not hurt her feelings, I say-
"Wow! I can clearly see a glowup."

Preeti smiles.

"I can't really see any difference." Dharvi says in confusion. Good thing Preeti didn't hear it.

"Oh, geez! Did it start snowing paper balls or something in the classroom?" Preeti looks around at the state of the floor.

"Paper ball fight, yeah," Dharvi replies.

Preeti sighs. "I missed all the fun."

Vaishali Mam walks inside the classroom and we all take seats.

There is space for two people on each bench in our class. Me and Preeti get seated on the last bench and Dharvi is seated just in front of us. There are four rows and we are sitting in the second row from the door.

Our sitting arrangement is perfect like always.

"Good morning, Eighth F," our new class teacher greets us with a polite smile. Now it's our turn to do the same so we all stand up.

She is not yet aware that my class *stretches and sings* the morning and afternoon greetings to teachers.

We start singing. “Good morning *mam* !!!!!” We stretch the word ‘*mam*’ as long as we can and break into giggles which are covered by our palms.

I honestly don’t get why teachers think that this is annoying. If I were a teacher, I would have loved to see the students so enthusiastic in the morning. Literally *singing* their greetings.

After our ‘*extremely humble morning greeting*’, Vaishali mam has started making a face that is easily readable. I know what she is thinking. I have seen many teachers make this face before too. For the past seven years.

The poor lady has just now realized that she had been given *the rotten class* by the other teachers, who had not informed her what she was going to deal with for a full year. The other teachers tricked her so that they only have one period a day with us, which, for them are 45 mins of pure torture.

Only now has she properly looked at the condition of our classroom.

The politely smiling Vaishali mam has disappeared, and replacing her is the strict Maths teacher, whom the students have always feared.

Damn, that rhymed.

Dharvi turns her face towards me and Preeti. “Where is Mira?” She whispers.

“She’s late again, duh.” Preeti replies.

“Sit down,” Vaishali mam orders and all forty-three of us, slump back in our seats. “As you must know, there are some rules and regulations—” She suddenly stops talking as the 4th member of our group and the 44th role number of our class appears at the door.

“May I come in mam?” says Mira who is late as always.

Vaishali mam raises an eyebrow so high, it could reach the ceiling. “No, you may not. First you will tell me your reason for being ten minutes late,” the teacher retorts.

“Uhhhh.... I don’t know. I mean it’s the first day, what could I possibly miss?” she says casually. “Besides, I am always late. Often because of unpredictable traffic in my area.”

“Well, that’s not my problem.” Vaishali mam says.

“And I blamed no one.” She laughs deadpan, something she can do. “Respectfully speaking, mam, it’s not my fault either that the government has installed poor traffic lights and facility to manage the morning rush in my area.”

Me, Preeti and Dharvi share a grin.

“Oh! That attitude young lady! You have got some nerve to speak to me like that. I will have to speak with your mother.” She is angry now but Momo is still casual.

Most of the times, teenagers addressing their genuine issues to elders is called ‘disrespect’.

But... whatever this is, it’s amusing.

“Sure, mam. But, if possible, please do it after some time. She’s probably running late too right now.” she says, still calm, composed and half-asleep.

Her short hair is messy, shoes are not polished, pants are not ironed and her eyelids are half closed. She looks like she had just gotten up from bed and had come directly to school, which, probably *is* the case.

“Detention! Just sit somewhere for now and I will deal with you later,” Vaishali mam finally gives up and continues explaining her rules and regulations.

Mira looks around the class and spots us at the back of it.

She sits beside Dharvi and smirks at us. “Buckle up, bevy. The gang’s back.” She says jokingly.

Me and Preeti give her a high five and Dharvi punches her. Mira pinches her cheek.

This is the moment I realize why I’ve been so excited all morning. The school’s the same. The students are the same. The same smell of cheap soap, iconic. But one thing I always want to stay the same is us.

The school rules are already scribbling shackles in our notebooks, but with us back together, the chains don’t stand a chance.

The Rebels are together at last- Louder, bolder,
badder... Ready to be rebellious once again.



Chapter 2

New teachers, new rules.

Vaishali mam finally completes telling her so called ‘RULES AND REGULATIONS’.

Which include many non-sensical things like-

Don't talk, don't wear watches, don't drink water without permission, don't use the restroom, don't ask too many questions etc.

What's next? Don't breathe? Why is there a rule for not asking too many questions. *This is literally a school.* And why is there a rule against wearing watches when there is another one for being punctual. There is not even a clock in our classroom! And in all those stupid rules, not even one prevents bullying.

Pretty sure they're drafting the constitution of hell, not a school rulebook.

While I'm mentally raging, Preeti looks like she got bored half-to-death.

Dharvi and Mira have already started hiding food under their table. *A lot* of food. An amount that could feed at least four people of our age.

Vaishali mam draws our attention towards her again.

Looks like she is not finished telling the rules yet.

“Last but not least is that ‘Sitting with friends is not allowed for the whole year,” she says it like she just cracked a joke.

My whole class gasps in utter shock.

She starts making seat arrangements that tear entire groups of friends apart. For the first time in history, the students of *the rotten class*, Eighth F actually seem *upset*. We were used to be the ones who made the teachers upset. *Just look how the tables have turned.*

Mrs. Vaishali is not going to get away with this easily.

Besides, it’s only the first day... *and it’s getting worse.*

Now all the groups have been torn apart. *Even mine.*

Dharvi and Mira are sitting in the third row from the door where they sit and look at me time-to-time to see if I got any solution to this problem and, I have not. I have not got any solution *yet*.

Me and Preeti are sitting in the first.

I have always disliked the first row. It’s kind of suffocating here and the right end of the door meets the wall of the classroom so, one of us will always be trapped at the other end until our partner has moved to give us way.

“Before I go, I have to check every student’s school uniform,” Vaishali mam announces.

"I'm screwed," Dharvi mouths, holding up her untied tie for Mira and Preeti to see.

"Oh, damn," Preeti presses her lips together.

Vaishali mam walks towards Dharvi and Mira. Dharvi tries to explain something but all I hear is Mrs. Vaishali's voice screaming- "Detention!"

Mira smirks because she couldn't give her detention *twice*. Dharvi flares her nostrils like a dragon.

After a few benches, it's me and Preeti's turn. Vaishali mam makes a face of disgust and says to Preeti, "Your hair is not appropriate... Detention!"

Preeti mutters under her breathe so that only I can hear. *"It's called fashion."*

Next, Vaishali mam examines my hair, skirt, shirt, tie, nails, shoes, and socks. "Pass," she says. I sigh in relief and grin while eyeing Mira and Dharvi.

Vaishali mam pauses and narrows her eyes at all four of us. Oops, I guess I just exposed my group members. "Wait... show me your bag."

I hand it over and she lifts it. "Too heavy. Open it."

I do. Vaishali mam raises an eyebrow again. She looks funny while doing it. She fishes out a book out of my bag.

"What's this?"

"A book, mam."

“I can see that! Not a syllabus book. It’s a novel,” she reads out the title, “*Five Classical Plays by William Shakespeare...* Not allowed, Detention!”

“Mam, but the bag isn’t the part of the dress code.”

Vaishali mam narrows her eyes at me. “Don’t you dare tell me the rules, missy.”

The bell rings and Mrs. Vaishali walks out of the classroom door. Eyes of hatred follow her until she is out of sight.

If looks could kill, she would need 44 funerals by now.

I guess the Rebels are going to detention *on day one...* along with a few other students.

A new teacher appears. She is a petite woman who looks around the age of thirty.

My class stands up to greet the teacher and we all sing again. It is a part of our daily routine.

“Good morning *mam !!!!!*” We stretch and sing the words again.

Surprisingly, she does not say anything to us for the *extremely humble morning greeting*.

She makes a gesture with her right hand in order to silently say ‘*please sit*’.

There’s an elegance in the way she moves, like someone raised on manners and morning prayers. The neatly pleated saree, the jasmine-scented calm- yeah, she

definitely teaches Hindi. We already know that Mrs. Mahima is the one who will be teaching Sanskrit this year.

Maybe she is kind and—

Never mind. What you'll see after this will change your opinion about her, like it changed mine.

She looks at Preeti and—

“Hey, you girl!” she says in a very-very-very-high-pitched-thin-voice. Some of the students even cover their ears as her voice sends shrills across the classroom.

She continues ~~speaking~~ shrieking to Preeti.

“Why didn’t you stand up like the entire class to greet me?!” she shrieks again.

Now she is even closer to our seat and my ears feel like they could burst anytime.

“Mam, I did stand to greet you,” Preeti says deadpan.

“Oh yeah?” she takes a glance at other students and asks them, “Did she really stand up?”

All the students nod in agreement.

“I guess you did then.” she laughs a little and says, “I guess you are just... short,” she breaks into laughter as if Preeti is the funniest thing she has ever seen.

Chica’s face has turned red. Not the cute kind but the one we wish to rub off our faces.

Mira shifts uncomfortably in her seat while Dharvi shoots me a look that screams- *'say the word and we're flipping this desk over.'*

I feel a rush of anger pumping through my veins but before it could reach my mouth and form into words that could be thrown at someone like poisonous arrows, Preeti squeezes my palm in order to say *'let it be...she's not worth it'* and slightly shakes her head.

That calms me down. A little.

I get really angry sometimes. *Especially* when someone body shames a person. A literal teenager! Preeti is a pretty girl but still judged like that.

“So, before I start teaching, you all must get to know me... I'm Aabha Murti...” She continues her introduction.

I am still sitting in Hindi class, waiting for an idea.

Besides that, I notice that Preeti is bubbly again as she usually is. I tried my best to change the topic and distract her from whatever happened. It was pathetic, really.

A classmate named Kanav sits behind me and constantly keeps coughing and sneezing without a handkerchief. Whatever Mrs. Aabha says, gets muffled up by his loud and disturbing throat sounds.

I feel the desperate need for a bath and a set of fresh uniform.

“Now all of you will take out a pencil and mark the important words in your Hindi literature book,” her voice is still the same. I wonder if she makes her voice like this on purpose, to annoy the students.

I unzip my pouch, fishing out my pencil. Blunt. Useless. Good thing I packed a sharpener. As I twist the blade, an idea sharpens in my mind—something that'll reconnect me with the gang.

I flick the lid open. My little black sharpener, barely the size of my thumb, has a compartment for collecting pencil shavings. Normally, trash. Today? A secret weapon.

I wonder if it we would get caught... it's worth a shot at least.

I lean toward Preeti and elbow her. *Game time.*

"What if we use this sharpener to pass notes?" I whisper.

She squints, confused. "How?"

"We write a note, tuck it inside, and pass it like it's just a piece of stationery. Nobody questions a sharpener."

Her eyes widen. "That's freaking genius! Who needs WhatsApp when we've got a sharpener?" Her whisperscream is masked by a wave of coughing—perfect cover.

I smirk, flipping open my notebook. Time to write to Mira and Dharvi.

Hey gurlies! This is how we talk now. Ostrich has a green one similar to this sharpener. No mistakes.

-Trouble

I write it in my code name; in case we get caught. In Regent's Heights, passing chits is like a criminal offence.

I pass the sharpener to Tushar Singh who passes it to Kritika who passes it to Divya who passes it to the right seat.

Divya points towards me as she hands it over to Dharvi and Mira. They both look at me, confused.

I point towards the sharpener. Dharvi still looks confused.

Mira seems to understand my unspoken words as she takes it from her hand and opens the lid. Their faces light up in understanding.

They open the folded chit of paper and read it. After some time, Tushar passes it back.

Dharvi and Mira give me a thumbs up. In the sharpener is another chit that says-

OKAY!

It's Dharvi's handwriting.



Chapter 3

Obedience.

Fourth period ends, and lunch begins. A stampede's incoming in the hallways.

The Rebels have been talking through the sharpener all this time and no one even noticed. The black one from me and Preeti's side and the green one from Dharvi and Mira's side. This plan worked out just fine.

The bell rings. We close our books and clear our benches in a rush.

It's lunch break! According to Vaishali mam, it's the only period in which rules don't apply. Well, *some of them don't*.

We open our lunch boxes and the aroma of food floods the entire school.

Lunch breaks are supposed to be a breather. A chance to reset before diving back into the day. But in my class? It's *survival*. All these crazy classmates of mine resemble some kind of jungle madness.

I know what's coming before it even happens, because it happens every time. My classmates don't just share food- *they snatch it*.

And my mother's cooking is the prime target.

I have dinner at night around 8pm and then I jump to lunch at around 3pm, when I get home from school. And this has been going on since I was in first grade.

If there is anything useful that the school has taught me, it's how to survive with an empty stomach for 19 hours straight.

Across from me, Dharvi and Mira have already flipped a desk to face us, settling in like it's a private meeting. Mira leans forward; voice low.

"Trouble, your sharpener idea? Brilliant." She smirks.

"Yeah?" I glance at Dharvi, who nods in agreement.

"It's the perfect way to pass notes. No suspicion, no risk. Just straight-up strategy." Preeti lifts her arm in the air.

I grin. We don't just get through school, we navigate it. Talking in class is one thing. But the thrill of pulling off something unnoticed? That's where it gets interesting.

Preeti watches me carefully. "You're different from the other toppers I've seen. Smart, but not quiet. A girl who breaks rules and aces tests? You don't meet many of those."

I raise an eyebrow. "That a compliment?"

"Obviously."

Dharvi sighs. "We have detention in fifth period."

“I don’t know if that’s bad, Ostrich,” Mira replies. “It’s Maths period and Vaishali mam already has issues with us. Better to write essays on stupid topics rather than to deal with our class teacher.”

“That sounds almost poetic,” Preeti cracks a grin, “Speaking of poetry... Trouble, you are really the first one to ever get detention for reading Shakespeare.”

I cross my hands a bit too dramatically. “*Oh, really?* Guys, *I* got detention because Vaishali mam got know that I’m *your* friend. Not because I was reading Shakespeare. I wasn’t even reading it; it was kept in my bag!”

“Hey, that’s too much complaining. We’ll have to disown you, literature kid,” Dharvi says and balances a pencil between her nose and upper lip to mimic a moustache.

They laugh. I can’t help but join.

I pop the lid open of my lunchbox.

And then, *commotion*.

A rush of hands- too fast to react, too many to stop.

One minute, full. The next, gone.

Just like that, my lunchbox is empty.

I exhale slowly, pressing it shut. “Not again.”

Preeti nudges her own lunch towards me. Dharvi does the same. “Take mine.”

I shake my head, smiling.

Lunchbreak is almost over.

Me and Mira are standing in the corridor, even though it's not allowed. Preeti and Dharvi went to use the restroom, even though it's not allowed. All four of us are out of the classroom, even though it's not allowed.

No one really cares about rules during lunch break. And as Mira suggested, they can't give us detention twice.

"So, Momo, what exactly possessed you to piss off Mrs. Vaishali today?" I ask, my left shoe against the wall and arms crossed. Feels like we're in a gangster movie.

Mira narrows her eyes. "I still don't understand what I said wrong."

"Everything was fine except one thing- that '*what could I possibly miss on the first day of school?*' line," I explain.

Mira sighs. "But it was the truth, wasn't it? Plus, I don't really see anything disrespectful in simply being straightforward and honest."

"That's right but unfortunately... the truth is seen far too rude by the teachers who are used to hearing sweet lies and fake flatters." I shrug.

Mira groans, burying her face in her hands "I slept late. Like disastrously late. And even when I managed to get ready and leave a bit earlier than my usual time, that stupid traffic came out of nowhere and ruined everything. So when I walked into class, I had one goal: find a dark

corner and rest. But guess who decided my exhaustion wasn't a problem?"

"I know it's not your fault but... you really looked at the strictest teacher in Eighth and thought, 'Yeah, let's ruin her morning and my school year.' Bold choice." I laugh.

She lets out a small laugh before shaking her head. "I know, I know. I was running on fumes, and you know how I get when I'm tired- reckless, snappy, borderline selfdestructive."

"Same logic applies when you and Ostrich are hungry. You two go feral."

We both crack up. Real friends are the ones who laugh off every up and down together.

Something tells me that Mrs. Vaishali is going to be at constant rivalry with her for the entire session.

We are headed back to the classroom when we spot Sakshi Kapoor, Yash Pande, Simran Ahuja and Vedant Yadav talking to a teacher.

They all are laughing as if they are some old friends who met after a long time. Oh, how easily they can fake smiles and ethics when only a few know their *real* face.

Sakshi and Yash are holding huge piles of purple school notebooks and it looks like they are helping the teacher.

As we get closer to them, Sakshi notices us. The teacher goes away, carrying a big bright smile on her face

with her. Sakshi and Yash throw the heavy notebook piles in Vedant's hands and he almost falls down.

"Put them in Eighth-H," Sakshi orders Vedant as if he was her slave. Vedant carries away the notebooks obediently. Sometimes I genuinely feel bad for him but then I recall what kind of friend he was to me and well, call me mean or anything but he deserves this treatment.

Me and Mira just want to walk across them but the Sakshi group seem to have other plans with us.

Yash sticks his huge leg out and Mira almost trips over it, I catch her in time.

"Oops," he says with a fake frown.

"Don't you all have anything else to do?" I ask.

"What do you mean?" Simran says in an extremely fake voice.

She blows a big bubble with her chewing gum and it bursts, making a little 'POP!' sound. She thinks that by chewing gum, she will look cool and all, but when it gets all over her face, she looks like a disgusting idiot.

"What she means is that, Yash, can't you just keep your damned legs with yourself?" Mira replies calmly.

"No... I'm so sorry," he says sarcastically and throws her leg towards Mira in a kick. "Go cry about it."

The three of them giggle. I grab Yash's hand and give it a tug while I lock eyes with him. "You better not touch

Mira or any other girl again when I'm standing *right* in front of you." At least his smirk is gone.

Sakshi slaps away my hand from Yash's hand. Her hand goes to the collar of my shirt. *What the hell is she doing?*

She sighs and says-

"Listen, I don't know why you think you are better than us but don't let me remind you your real position."

"Sakshi, I don't think that I'm better than you," I say, my nails digging in her hand and leaving red half-moons on her skin, "In fact, I *know* I'm better than you."

I release my grip on her hand and she rubs it aggressively, still scowling.

I decide not to make a scene and walk towards the classroom. Vedant is back without the huge pile of notebooks, panting. I can never understand what tempted him to be a servant of Sakshi and join her group when Me and Jiya advised that idiot not to.

All this to be a part of the so called 'popular' kids of Eighth.

"Let's go, Mira." I say as I start moving. Mira follows me.

Yash sticks out his huge leg again but this time, he wants *me* to fall to *his* feet. I step on his leg instead.

"Ouch!" He cries out. Vedant tries to help him but he pushes him away.

The bell rings. And the corridor is hustling again with students.

“Saved by the bell,” Sakshi mutters.

“Such cowards!” Simran laughs. I turn back to face her.

“Oh, and Simran, that gum will not get you anywhere with the cool kids,” I call out. She turns red.

“Let’s go, Trouble.” Mira smirks.

— — — — —

Me and Mira meet up with Preeti and Dharvi at the detention room as the fifth period starts.

“Time to go to jail.” Preeti pouts.

We enter the dusty classroom. Arun is already there with Kritika, who is napping on the last bench. A few other students are also there, wearing torn uniforms and having messy hair.

“They all look like spoiled kids from movies.” Preeti whispers. I nod.

A pair of them are scrapping wood from an already crooked desk. The three more are using a duster as a throwball.

“Sup, guys.” Arun grins at us, “Kritika, wake up! See.”

Kritika rubs her eyes and yawns. “Finally... some girls. I get bored everyday with these big idiots.” The Rebels look at each other. “Well, don’t just stand and stare. Sit.”

We take seats.

Arun laughs. “Well, I’m a small idiot.”

Kritika leans forward. “So... First time in detention?”

“Yes,” me and Preeti say.

“Nope,” Dharvi and Mira add.

“Oh, I see.” Kritika nods. “Just stay away from that boy, Dev. He might try to... *charm* you. And it gets really irritating at times.” She points towards him as he plays throwball with a duster.

Dharvi gags. Mira raises her eyebrows in surprise. Preeti’s lips twitch into a sneer.

I blink in confusion. “That boy looks barely ten.”

“He’s in fifth standard, yeah.” Kritika narrows her eyes at him.

Looking at our faces, Arun adds- “Well, you can see why he is in detention.”

“What’s with them?” Mira asks, pointing towards the guys scrapping off wood with sharp metal rulers.

“Oh, don’t mind them,” Arun says. “They are just kids who wanted to be artists or something but ended up in Regent’s Heights... really unfortunate, if you ask me. They got here because they drew in a science group activity today in class teacher period.” He explains.

Dharvi asks, confused- “They *drew* in a science group activity? And got detention?”

“Yeah, they had to draw and label a human skeleton that they had learnt in last year’s course but instead, they drew a skeleton doing ballet.”

“That’s actually really creative,” I add.

“But still, they got here because... as the teacher quoted, *‘they were not being serious enough.’*” Kritika mocks.

“And them?” Preeti points towards the two kids playing with Dev.

Kritika shrugs. “Don’t know. Probably something like ‘went to the washroom without a pass’ or ‘was talking in class,’ or something... you know, all the normal things that teachers make a huge deal about.”

“I think everyone here right now just got in detention because the teachers were having a bad day,” I say, “Except for that fifth grader, of course.”

Preeti makes a face of disgust.

“Damn, and here are you, Trouble. In detention for being a literature kid.” Mira mocks me.

I giggle and push her a little too hard. She falls on the floor.

A teacher enters the classroom. Mira hides beneath the desk. I realize that it’s none other than Mrs. Deepti. Good thing she didn’t notice Mira.

Preeti and Dharvi realize that too.

Deepti mam seems to be in a hurry, thankfully. She takes our attendance but doesn’t notice that Dharvi

changed her voice to be marked as Mira. Though, she *does* realize that among the eleven students sitting in detention on day one, *six* of them are from class 8-F.

“The infamously rotten class, of course,” she scoffs at the attendance sheet.

Arun giggles like a child, “We’re famous.”

Kritika rolls her eyes. “She said ‘infamous’, you dumbo.”

“Yeah, but I only focus on positivity.”

Mrs. Deepti clears her throat. “The task for you all today is... Writing an essay on ‘Obedience’. You have half an hour to write four hundred to seven hundred words. You cannot speak, move or cheat off others’ sheets. Keep it on the desk; I’ll collect.”

She goes away and Mira pops out from beneath the desk, sweating from heat. “Phew.” She sighs in relief.

Dharvi sighs too, but frowningly. “Let’s get working.”

I stare at the blank sheet that was given to me, tapping my pen on it in a slight rhythm. I don’t know what to write so I look around.

Mira is writing something like *‘With obedience, we succeed. Like Aeschylus once said- Obedience is the mother of success and is wedded to safety. Obedience starts at school and we should obey the school rules to achieve our*

goal in life. We should never...' Her handwriting is really pretty.

Preeti hasn't written much yet. *'Obedience is nice. I love obedience. I think we all should be obedient...'*

Arun doesn't have a pen so he is laying back and resting. Kritika's sheet is too far away to read.

Dharvi is writing something like *'The club isn't the best place to find a lover, so the bar is where I go. Me and my friends at the table doing shots, drinking fast and then we talk slow. You come over and start up a conversation with...'*

"Are you seriously writing the lyrics of *'Shape of You'* by Ed Sheeran?" I laugh.

"Hehe." She replies.

I start writing too. This doesn't have to be perfect, after all.

"Obedience in School"

(The essay written in detention)

They say obedience is the root of good education. That good students listen, nod, and never ask why. But if silence builds intelligence, then the walls of our classrooms would be the wisest things to exist.

Every day, we are taught to underline the right answers, not to question the wrong ones. We memorize lessons we didn't choose, follow rules we didn't write, and call it learning. They say obedience makes us disciplined. But what it really makes us is tamed.

The first thing a school kills is not time. It's wonder. You can see it in the eyes of every child who once asked "why?" and now only asks "is this in the exam?" Obedience doesn't make better students. It makes safer ones. And we know that curiosity is the greatest weapon. I guess, that's why it's taken away from children.

Ones who know when to speak, when to stop, and how to blend in perfectly with the wallpaper... makes them easier to manage, easier to grade, easier to forget. But maybe that's the goal. Maybe obedience is just the school-word for silence. For stillness and control. Respect and obedience are not the same. Respect listens while obedience bows. And between those two gestures lies the difference between learning and losing yourself.

Every rulebook seems harmless until it starts to steal YOUR freedom. Every rulebook is written with calm hands, but signed in stolen voices. They punish us for speaking too loudly, dreaming too differently, thinking too freely.

Obedience even wears different masks for different genders. Boys who talk back are called confident; girls who do the same are called disrespectful. A boy being loud is "energetic," a girl being loud is "attention-seeking." We're taught the same lessons but judged by different rules, and then told the system is fair. Girls are taught to shrink, to be polite, quiet, agreeable, or else risk being labelled "arrogant." Boys, on the other hand, are told to never cry, never fail, never ask for help. Girls are punished for speaking too much, boys for feeling too much. Both end up learning that obedience means hiding who they truly are.

School obedience doesn't just shape how we behave. It shapes how we think. We're told to colour inside the lines until we forget that blank space ever existed. Every student is pushed down the same narrow road: doctor, engineer, lawyer- the holy trinity of "success." We compete like its survival, chasing ranks, marks, and dreams that aren't even ours. The system breeds copies, not creators; it rewards memorization, not imagination. And somewhere between all those report cards and deadlines, the artist, the writer, the inventor, all fade into silence, sacrificed at the altar of "respectable futures."

So, if obedience means staying quiet while something unfair happens, if it means lowering your eyes when truth stands you, then maybe

the brave thing is not to obey. Maybe rebellion is not breaking the rules... it's rewriting them. Because the best students aren't the most obedient. They're the ones who stay awake when everyone else is told to sleep.

*I know this essay won't be read by anyone... And maybe it's better that way. It would be buried beneath the pile of detention scribbles that have been sitting in a corner, gathering dust from the past decade. And perhaps that's what this essay really is... Not disobedience, just honesty,
In its most dangerous form.*

—Tavisha Singhal

(written on 01-04-2024)



Chapter 4

Baddies breaking the bully code.

We manage to get to our class just in time. Today's sixth period is also Mathematics and Mrs. Vaishali is back. Eyes of hatred are *still* following her at every step.

The Sakshi group comes to the classroom thirty minutes after our arrival.

"Did you call a maid to unlock my locker in the staffroom?" Vaishali mam asks the witches.

They couldn't possibly have done that. They were wandering in the complete opposite way of the staffroom and they could never find a maid there. But I also know that they are going to come up with the lamest excuse ever and the teacher will blindly believe them somehow.

Sakshi steps forward from her group.

"Mam, I'm sorry we couldn't do the task," she says.
Just as expected.

I am waiting patiently for the lamest excuse in the entire history of lame excuses.

For a second, she stops talking as if she's just done explaining the- ...Oh, here it is.

“You see, mam, we tried a lot to enter the staffroom but a strict teacher was not letting us in,” she tries to explain.

“Which teacher?” Mrs. Vaishali asks.

All four of them shake their cunning little heads. Simran also steps forward.

“We don’t know. She was already annoyed by us and it wouldn’t look nice if we asked her name,” Simran says, artificial sweeteners mixed in her voice.

“Okay, why didn’t you call the maid? She would surely be allowed in the staffroom,” Vaishali mam asks.

Sakshi flips her head-to-knee long witch-like hair braid.

“Mam, we tried a lot to find a maid... In fact, we searched the entire school just for you, but couldn’t find one,” she replies as if she just uprooted a mountain for the teacher, “It’s strange, I know.”

“Yes mam, we hope you understand,” Simran says in a sad tone.

Understand? Seriously? I glance at Preeti, then Dharvi and Mira. By looking at their faces, I know they are thinking the same thing. These four students couldn’t find a single maid in the entire building with over 40 maids and around 300 faculty and staff members who could have helped them.

“Yes, I understand. Please take your seats. And thank you for trying to help me so much. I’ll make sure that each

of you are notified with all the work you missed to help me,” Mrs. Vaishali says sympathetically.

Sakshi gives me a slight glance and smiles. I ignore her. The truth is that they simply bunked Maths class.

The Sakshi group consists of two pairs of horrible and overrated girls and boys who want to gain popularity by bullying other students.

They look as if they are straight out of the Mean girls movie. They are the Plastics of our school, but the only difference is that the Sakshi group is a thousand times less attractive than the actresses and actors in the movie.

You can find Sakshi-like students in every school (although no one wants to). These kids are not even good at studies but still are the teachers’ favorites somehow. All this while teachers completely ignore the students with real creativity and intelligence.

There are many students in my school who hate them just like the Rebels.

Many of them hate the Sakshi group but most of the students fear them. But the teens I hate more are the ones who do nothing against bullying.

That is the reason why the Rebels are a part of a secret group which is known as the Intervention group.

It’s not like we want to make their school lives miserable or something. *Two wrongs don’t make a right.* We just try our best to defend others who cannot protect themselves.

Our parents didn't raise us to be naïvely oppressed by some senseless wannabes.

Besides, there is nothing worse than feeling humiliated in middle school.

Though, the Rebels don't know much about the Intervention group. Like-

How many other students are involved in it?

Who is the I.V group leader?

How does the leader know which students are going to be bullied?

How does he/she communicate with us?

Well, I guess we know the last part... at least, *partially*.

We know that this leader is a clever fox, most likely a girl. This person somehow puts a letter in our notebooks which, we receive after their checking is done. He/she can communicate with us but we cannot. He/she knows literally *everything* going on in the school.

I just don't get it how this person manages to pull it off.

No one in the school knows about this secret group, *publicly*.

And whenever I read one of these letters, I always wonder... *just how much this person know about us?*

I remember being shocked when I received his/her first letter to me. It was around one year ago. All four of the Rebels received one. It explained briefly about what

the group was. It mostly said that the leader needed our help.

We thought that it was some sort of a prank at first, but when the things written in it started to come true, all of it started to make sense.

We have protected forty-nine students since then from Sakshi's group. We have only failed one mission. The one where Sakshi bullied Rhea for having a dark toned skin colour. It was our 32nd mission. I felt the kind of defeat that I've never felt before in my lifetime. She left the school because of humiliation after passing 7th grade.

Just like Jiya left the school.

Most of you reading this might think that-

Oh, these school things are so childish. Why is Tavisha even being serious about them?

But, let me tell you, as a former victim of school bullying, I can confirm you that it can lead to such a low self-esteem that only *years* of internal healing can cure.

I don't want this to happen to other students too, so I try my best to protect them at all cost. It feels like a responsibility. A duty. Against this little group of horrid children.

Back in sixth grade, Sakshi wasn't a villain.

She wasn't the girl who weaponized eye-rolls and whispers. She was... funny. Bubbly. A little annoying. But not cruel.

And she was Lavina's best friend. They were inseparable opposites in every way, but still.

Lavina had that calm kind of vibe. She'd stop fights with a line or a look. Sakshi? She'd start them and then act like she didn't.

But something changed.

Maybe it was a fight.

Maybe Lavina said something Sakshi couldn't forgive.

No one remembers the details- just the aftermath.

That's when Simran came in.

She wasn't close to either of them before, but she was always watching. Quiet, strategic.

And when Lavina drifted away, Simran swooped in like she was waiting for the moment. They teamed up, and suddenly, Sakshi wasn't just evil. She was evil with encouragement.

Around the same time, Yash joined our school.

New boy. Tall. Tried too hard. Laughed at everything a second too late.

He got picked on the first week- voice too twisted, accent too fake.

So he joined them.

Better to be part of the fire than get burned by it.

They were a trio now: Sakshi, Simran, Yash. And together, they fed off power like it was candy.

It started slow. A shove here. A joke too loud. A message left on someone's desk.

But it grew.

Then came seventh grade. The year I stopped liking coming to school.

Lavina had gotten quieter. She didn't stop them anymore.

And me? I was alone. The kind of alone you don't tell anyone about. No group, no backup. I kept my head down.

But that made it worse.

Sakshi noticed. Simran whispered. Yash laughed. Every day, something. Small things, but they add up.

I remember once, I dropped my bottle in class. Sakshi picked it up and held it like it was radioactive.

"Is it what sadness tastes like?" she said, handing it back.

Everyone laughed. I didn't.

Then Vedant joined their group. He wasn't like them. Not at first. He looked unsure, like he was always trying to catch up. But he stayed. Maybe because they gave him a place.

Maybe because when you've been powerless, a little power feels addictive.

He never said the mean things. But he didn't stop them either. And that... somehow hurt more.

That year, Lavina disappeared from their circle entirely.

And I realized something about bullies: they don't start wicked. They just stop caring.

Sakshi needed control.

Simran needed attention.

Yash needed approval.

Vedant needed safety.

But me? I just needed a break.

And eventually... I found it.

With Preeti. Then Mira. Then Dharvi.

Not instantly. Not perfectly. But real.

And from there, the Rebels began.

But before the Rebels and when 'I' was 'We'... we were once three.

Me, Jiya, Vedant.

Three musketeers without the swords, but with matching pencil cases and a shared secret stash of jokes nobody else ever got.

Five years. Five solid years.

Until Sakshi broke it like it was made of chalk.

Snide remarks, passed notes, eye rolls in the corridor. Jiya was quieter than us, softer. She didn't fight back, not

because she couldn't, but because she still believed people could be better.

Vedant didn't defend her that day when the Sakshi group humiliated her and I wasn't there.

He just watched. And then... he laughed.

The day Sakshi spilled ink on Jiya's white shirt, called her "charity case" in front of the whole class- he *laughed*.

"It's just a joke," he said, but he never looked at me after that.

Jiya stopped coming by lunch. Then she stopped smiling. Then she stopped showing up altogether.

She left mid-year. Left the city. Left the trio we promised would last forever. All she had were her grandparents. No complaints filed. No justice served.

And Vedant? He got a seat upgrade straight into Sakshi's kingdom.

Now he's their background prop. Laughs when told, carries their bags, copies their homework like a ghost with no opinions. I don't know if he ever feels guilty. Maybe he does. Maybe he buries it.

Jiya and Vedant were like my sister and brother. We don't get to choose our real family but we get to choose our 'school family', as we used to call it in third grade.

But it all went to ash.

And that would've been the end of everything... Until the great reshuffling.

Blame it on Class Teacher Sharda and her obsession with "better combinations." One random morning, she changed all the seating.

Just like that, I was thrown beside Preeti, the only girl I tolerated. She had always been funny in a weird way, and she didn't care about popularity or followers. She just existed- unbothered. At that time, she was that type of friend who gave me a reason to come to school again.

Across from us were two new seats: Mira, who was too sharp and opinionated for her own good, and Dharvi, who barely spoke but had this don't-mess-with-me silence to her.

I didn't like them. Not at first.

Lunch was awkward. Conversations were short. I missed Jiya, constantly wondering how she's doing now. Was she happy? Satisfied? Did she miss me like I missed her? I somewhat missed Vedant too. The older version of him, rather.

I missed the ease of a trio that knew me.

But something shifted.

Maybe it was the day Preeti cracked a joke about Sharda mam's moustache and Dharvi spit her water.

Maybe it was when Mira silently passed me a chocolate bar when they humiliated a girl for putting on lip balm and ignored the boy for fat-shaming her. And I was fuming.

Maybe it was when Preeti drew a devil horn on the principal's photo from the newspaper.

Maybe it was when I caught all three of them glaring at Sakshi like I did.

Maybe it was when we realized that we were trained to obey, not think.

Maybe it was when we stopped whispering about the rules... and started breaking them.

We didn't bond over butterflies and pinky promises.

We bonded over quiet rage, stolen lunch laughs, and the shared feeling of being tired of watching the powerful step on the soft.

We became *the Rebels*.

It wasn't some fancy group name that caught on because the school whispered it in hallways.

It was me. I called us the Rebels.

Not because we broke rules for fun. Not because we had matched jackets or a clubhouse.

But because we never fit the mold, and we stopped apologizing for it.

One day, during lunch, Sakshi muttered something under her breath as we passed her row.

"There go the rejects."

Mira rolled her eyes. Dharvi didn't even flinch. Preeti just bit into her sandwich and said, "She's not wrong. We're not part of that system."

That's when it hit me.

We weren't rejects... We were refusers.

Of their rules. Of their definitions. Of their fake perfection.

So that evening, while doodling in my notebook like I always do when my brain's too full to think, I scribbled it in bold:

THE REBELS.

We didn't have to declare it to anyone. I started using it in my journal, in my notes to myself.

And soon, it wasn't just a name. It was a statement.

We were the Rebels.

Because while everyone else followed blindly,
we dared to choose.



Chapter 5

Trouble since 2011.

15 days later... (15th of April)

If turning thirteen was a Netflix movie, I would have entered the scene in slow-mo., hair flipping, eyes rolling, *Diet Mountain Dew* by Lana Del Rey playing in the background.

But it's rather quiet and calm in real life.

There's just a different vibe on birthdays. The sky seems to smile at me and the morning air smells sweet enough to taste like mangoes as I move to my bus stop.

As soon as I am inside my bus, Lavina starts to sing the birthday song, followed by Shanaya. I don't get why birthday songs are so cute and awkward at the same time.

I move up the stairs of the school. A bag of chocolate bars in each hand. Alongside a paper bag in which my tree center piece is carefully kept. Vaishali mam asked me to make it for the class board.

"Here, let me help." Lavina suggests as she takes a chocolate bag.

"No need." I smile and pull it towards me.

“Shut up.” Lavina rolls her eyes and laughs, helping me anyways. Shanaya does the same with the other bag.

I move through the corridor and Shanaya does something that is part-sweet-part-embarrassing.

“Hey, listen up everyone! It’s my friend, Tavisha’s birthday today!” She raises her voice as high as she can and soon, I have lost count of all the wishes I have received today.

Preeti and Dharvi are waiting for me a little further in the hallway and they break my back with birthday bombs.

“Oh, love of my life, Happy Birthday!!!” Preeti says jokingly and we laugh.

“Party’s up by evening, right?” Dharvi asks.

“Of course.” I smirk.

As we’re about to reach our classroom when someone grabs my hand. Mira giggles and my back is tortured for the third time today.

“Happy-oldest-you’ve-ever-been-and-youngest-you’ll-ever-be-day!” Mira says as she jokingly pulls me into a little dance. She doesn’t seem to care about how many people are watching us in the corridor. Social anxiety is afraid of her. So I carry on with the moment, ignoring the eyes.

I laugh. Preeti blinks- “Ain’t that every day?”

Mira thinks for a second and then she says- “Oh, my apologies,” She giggle, “Happy Birthday, Trouble.” “Thankyou.” I smile.

We walk inside the classroom like any other day. Except it’s not. And someone’s clearly been busy.

There is it.

Strung across the whiteboard with sparkly tape and way too much commitment. Written in bold red letters-

**URNS 13 AND THINKS SHE’S BETTER
THAN US.**

Golden highlights. Capital letters. The whole thing looks like a Pinterest fail.

The Rebels look at each other, confused. But only for a second until realization hits us. Vaishali mam is not here yet so someone just *had* to be a vibe-killer.

Sakshi is standing beside the whiteboard with duct tape in one hand and scissors in the other. She looks at me up and down and smiles- “Thought I’d make it special.”

Yash barks out a laugh- “She’s here! All hail the *queen*.”

A few backbenchers laugh. Simran starts to clap slowly from the fourth row’s back seat. Vedant is cleaning the glitter mess.

Without wasting a second, Preeti yells. “You finally accepted royalty.”

Simran stops clapping. More laughter.

“I never wanted my birthday to turn into a circus,” I roll my eyes as I tell this to Mira and Dharvi.

Dharvi pats my back with reassurance. “Trouble, this is what happens when you are surrounded by jokers. At least Preeti is right about what she said.” She laughs.

That brings the vibe back.

Mira winks at me. Oh no, she’s about to do something.

Mira narrows her eyes at Sakshi who high-five’s Simran and Yash. Then, she walks like a boss to the board saying “*Move*, peasants.” Mira pushes past Yash, grabbing a thick black marker.

To the ‘*Turns 13 and thinks she’s better than us*’ comment, she replies in bold letters-

SHE IS. NEXT QUESTION.

Me and Preeti laugh. Dharvi whistles. Mira sneers as she glares at Sakshi. Sakshi’s eyes flash with anger.

The class erupts.

“Sakshi, you remembered her birthday?” Kritika laughs with her friend circle of class clowns, “I mean, that’s actually so sweet!” She says sarcastically.

Sakshi’s group take their seats with embarrassment. The Rebels do the same but we do it with pride. Those who try to shame others, always end up with their plan backfiring.

More comments explode from the class like popcorn popping in a cooker.

“Aww, Sakshi, you made her a custom banner? You’re such a huge fan! Give her an autograph!” Arun laughs hysterically.

Even Utkarsh, the quiet kid, chuckles from his seat.

After everything cools down, Sakshi orders Vedant to remove that horrid banner. He obeys and also removes what Mira wrote on the white board.

Vaishali mam comes to the class and soon realizes the occasion. She makes my class wish me ‘Happy Birthday’ by singing that song which makes my goosebumps rise. My class obeys dutifully as it’s their favorite thing about school, stretching and singing words.

This is so embarrassing... Like, what do you do? Stand and smile? Smiling from the outside but screaming from the inside!!!

The only ones who are not singing are Sakshi, Simran and Yash. They look sad, angry, and irritated, all at once. Vedant looks... I don’t know, he just looks.

Vaishali mam stares at my creation for the class board, astonished and amazed.

“Amazing! Absolutely brilliant! Class, I think we all are going to win the Best class board award this time!” She announces. My class breaks into cheers.

Sakshi looks like she is about to cry. Or maybe she looks like she wants to break my neck.

Mrs. Vaishali tells me to put up my tree on the class board and hands me a stapler. As soon as I’m headed towards the back of the class to do so, Sakshi gets in my

way and tries to snatch the six hours of hard work out of my hands.

“Tavisha, just give the tree to me. I’m the class board leader!” She yells at me, desperately.

“What kind of leader? You haven’t even made a single thing for the board,” I reply truthfully.

She is still trying to snatch it but I hold it as high as I can. She is shorter than me and is still jumping to get the beautiful center piece. There is no way I’m going to let her put her hands on it. I learnt my lesson last year when I let her put my 3D demonstration for an earthquake on the board for me, thinking *“Just how bad can it be?”*.

Well, it was bad. Really bad.

She somehow managed to break all of its layers that fell on top of a girl’s head. When Sharda mam (our former class teacher) asked what happened, she replied that “I guess that the model Tavisha made was not durable and it fell apart.”

When I said that I can fix it she said, “Sorry, too late for that. I already threw it in the trash thinking it was useless.” She said hiding her smile. Then, she came up to me and whispered in my ear, saying, *“It was useless just like you and your stupid friends, Vedant and Jiya.”* I felt sad but mostly *angry*.

I told this to Mrs. Sharda but she ignored the complaint because I had no ‘proof’. Plus, it hurt to say but, another reason for me not defending myself more is because I was scared of her and Simran.

But that's not what's going to happen this time.

I make my way to the end of the classroom and put the tree carefully on the board, in the center. It takes me ten minutes to put on the trunk and another twenty minutes to put on the leaves and branches.

My class gasps. It's the first time they are seeing it.

"That girl's amazing, y'all," Dharvi yells. I smile at her.

When it's lunch break, I hand over a chocolate to each of the students. My close friends steal a few more. I give bigger ones to my subject teachers, going to their classes.

I make an imaginary list to keep track.

- Mrs. Vaishali (Mathematics)
- Mrs. Aabha (Hindi)
- Mrs. Mahima (Sanskrit)
- Mrs. Manisha (Social-Science)
- Mrs. Anjali (English)
- Miss Shruti (Science)

And of course, how can I forget Mrs. Shalini. She is an English teacher but unfortunately, she does not teach my class. She is also the coolest teacher in the entire school because, unlike some teachers, she treats students like human children and not like some homework submission machines.

I have brought many gold trophies in the English interschool competitions to Regent's Heights all because

she gave me a chance and trained me for them. Our school definitely needs more teachers who are as devoted as her to teaching.

After lunch break is over, I recall that it's Monday.

On Mondays we have Art class in fifth period.

When Uma mam enters the classroom, I greet her with a chocolate bar and she wishes me a 'Happy Birthday'. On the other hand, my class greets her with their *extremely humble morning greeting*. After they realize that it's afternoon, they greet her again with their stretched song.

"Good afternoon *mam* !!!!!"

Miss Uma doesn't react. She just rolls her eyes like she's seen it all before. But her eyes stop rolling as they find the tree I'd put on the class board.

She walks over, curious, tracing a branch with her finger. "Who made this?" she asks.

I raise my hand.

She gives a small, genuine smile. "Well, fun fact—it's actually International Art Day today. That explains a lot," she says with a wink.

I smile back, "Thank you, ma'am."

From the corner of the room, there's a loud *crack*. Sakshi, apparently not a fan of trees or compliments, has snapped her pencil clean in half—and earned herself a splinter.

My mother had told me to invite everyone to my birthday party. Everyone. *Even the Sakshi group.*

She said that it would not be fair if I don't invite someone to the party.

I had to obey her so I asked them and here's how it went- "Umm... Hey! You guys!" I awkwardly approach them.

"What do you want?" Simran says chewing the stupid gum. Confusion is written brightly across their faces.

"I just... Well, I was... Umm... Are you guys free this Saturday?" I ask.

Asking these people? Personally? It's so humiliating.

"Umm... Why?" Sakshi raises an eyebrow.

"It's for my birthday party... You guys are invited. See, my mother said to invite *everyone* so don't take it the other way," I try to explain.

"I am thinking about it... Wait, a second. Just wait here," she says.

"Umm... okay? I am waiting for your decision."

I really don't want her to come but it will feel even more embarrassing if she rejected my invite.

She mutters something.

"Sorry, what was that?" I ask.

She raises her voice as high as she can and says-

“Didn’t you hear me? I said that I don’t want to come to your birthday party. Stop wasting my time!” Some of the students laugh. What? She didn’t even-

Oh, the realization hits me like a bus as she walks away. She wanted to show everyone that I’m begging her to show up at my party and she doesn’t want to come. That little witch.

Vedant looks at me apologetically. I roll my eyes. I don’t want apologies from someone who pretended to be my friend.

6 days later... (Saturday)

We had a blast at my Birthday Party! This is how it went- Many people came to my party.

Simran also showed up, I knew she wanted to come but didn’t show her desire in front of Sakshi.

The Rebels are hanging out at the back of the restaurant when everyone is dancing at the disco. No one in our group is fond of dancing.

Preeti notices Simran and elbows me.

“Why is she here when she rejected the invite?” she asks. “Sakshi speaks for her. Simran is not even brave enough to express her opinions freely,” I reply.

“That’s true,” Dharvi says, “Anyways, why is she wearing that on her face?” she asks, disgusted.

“Do you mean her fifty layers of makeup?” Mira asks.

“Uh-huh,” Dharvi nods her head.

“Her mascara is a disaster. Too clumpy.” Preeti says as she sips on iced coffee.

“She must have wanted to snatch Trouble’s spotlight. But it’s her day.” Mira looks at my red top and black skirt outfit in awe.

I smile. “There’s no problem in makeup but the problem is a person’s behavior.”

“Yeah,” Preeti giggles, “I too like makeup but neither I have bad behavior nor I want to steal the spotlight... well, at least not today.” She does a cinema-like mocking hair flip.

“She should eat some of her makeup. Maybe it will make her prettier from the inside,” I say.

We laugh on stupid stuff until our stomachs hurt.

The evening party was great but now is the time for my favorite part. A sleepover only with the Rebels.

My parents drive us back home and we change into comfortable PJs.

Here’s what we do-

- ✓ Binge watch Stranger Things with snacks.
- ✓ A pillow fight with snacks.
- ✓ Tell horror stories with head-to-toes wrapped blankets and snacks.

- ✓ Sneak into the kitchen when we should be sleeping... for snacks.
- ✓ Play UNO with snacks.

Yeah, I know. *A lot of snacks.*

We spent the whole night laughing... and then we realized that we'd basically eaten tomorrow's breakfast too.



Chapter 6

Just how bad can a Monday be?

*M*onday...

I am back to school.

It seems so weird. From the last fifteen days, I have been planning and counting down the days for my birthday party and now it's over... just in a blink of an eye.

Our H.P.E (health and physical education) period is being cancelled again and again from the last few weeks just because someone or the other didn't complete their notebook work. Eighth F is pretty pissed off by that.

I don't get why they punish everyone in the class and take away our sports education rights even when they are included in the high fees that the school charges our parents.

They increase the fees every year for every batch and call it a quality 'upgrade' when all we see is the school degrading.

It's CTP right now (Class teacher Period). Everyone is half-asleep. I can hear yawning everywhere. It's so contagious that I have yawned around ten times myself now. Me, the coffee girl who is never drowsy.

It's Monday Morning after all.

We're stuck in this never-ending loop- 7 hours at school, an hour commuting, 2 more at extra tuitions, then homework from both sides. Add in eating, showering, pretending to be functional humans... and suddenly the day's gone.

Self-study? Hobbies? They get pushed to the bottom of the list, even though they're what actually help us grow. And for only a few numbers on a sheet, printed by a system that has barely evolved since our grandparents were kids.

An average score won't ruin your life. But learning to swim, paint, dance, solve real problems- or write your own book? That's the kind of experience that sticks. That's what shapes you and your identity.

And yeah, some students do manage to crush academics *and* chase passions. Golden. But imagine if schools gave us just a little breathing room, cut the mountain of homework and let more of us thrive instead of just survive.

A yawn brings me back to reality.

Preeti is sitting beside me as usual and she is spinning with tiredness. I see Dharvi sleeping, her face is covered by her history book. Mira hasn't arrived yet.

It may be a cloudy day today but there is an unlikely chance of rain in New Delhi in the month of April.

Though, it's enough to make my class sleepy. Well... sleepier than usual.

Vaishali mam enters the classroom late. She looks even more tired than her students. There are dark circles under her eyes and her I-am-a-strict-teacher energy also seems to be missing today.

I look closely and observe something. She is wearing henna designs on both of her hands. Telltale signs of an Indian family gathering. It was probably for someone's wedding. No wonder she looks so tired.

"Sakshi..." Mrs. Vaishali yawns out her name and says, "please take the attendance for me, okay?"

"Sure," she says, smiling. Sakshi and I may hate each other but we also share somethings similar. For instance, we both are always way more energetic than the rest of the students but in a calm way.

The other similarity is that we both lost our best friends in seventh grade and both were her fault.

She starts taking names, roll number wise.

"Vedant, 35?" "Present."

"Tavisha, 36?" "Here."

37 had always been for Jiya... but she's not here now.

"Prayag, 37?" "Present mom- mam- I mean Sakshi."

My class laughs a little with no energy.

After a few rollcalls, it's Mira's turn.

“Mira, 44?”

“Present! Present!” Mira comes sprinting into the classroom, completely out of breath.

Vaishali mam still hates her. Though, it is no surprise that she didn’t say anything to her this time.

Today’s a blue Monday after all.

— — — — —

Dharvi and Mira slip out of their fixed seats and sit in front of me and Preeti. Many students do the same.

Preeti was afraid that the Sakshi group could snatch on us for changing our seats but now that the entire class has done that, we cannot be highlighted.

The more, the better.

Vaishali mam comes to the classroom again. It’s been only ten minutes since she left class and now all the students are in different seats. She seems astonished by just how much *the rotten class* suits its given title.

She sighs and says- “Now it’s time for the morning prayer.” And as you can guess... Instead of simply reciting the prayer, like the other class sections, Eighth F sings it in the highest pitched and stretched choir you’ll ever hear. My class would never miss it, even when their energy is so low.

Vaishali mam says nothing. Again. I’m starting to think that she is not even Mrs. Vaishali Batra anymore.

“Please open your CTP notebooks everyone and note down the thought of the day which is...”

She stops talking as the classroom door opens. All of the heads turn towards the person walking inside.

We all legit stop breathing for a second. Standing at the door is Mrs. Harsha Deshmukh- the senior teacher even the *other* teachers whisper about like she’s Voldemort.

Surprise visit? Yeah, terrifying.

“Good morning, mam. Please come in,” says Mrs. Vaishali, trying to smile like she didn’t just age ten years in five seconds.

We all shoot up from our chairs.

No one, not even the class clown (who once sang the morning prayer for the school assembly in a Minions voice), dares to sing the morning greeting this time.

“Good morning, ma’am,” we say. Flat. Robotic. Zero emotion.

Mrs. Harsha’s face is a mystery. Not angry, not happy- just this blank, unreadable expression like she’s wearing a poker face mask.

The Rebels shoot each other a glance. One look, and I already know what they’re thinking. Real best friends don’t need words.

Why is she staring at us like that?

What’s she even doing here?

Are we supposed to sit?

Stay standing?

Are we dead?

We all kind of shrug at the same time.

Then she finally speaks. “Students of Class Eighth F...”

Her voice has that strict, no-jokes tone. Like, if your brain even *thought* about relaxing, it would regret it.

“As you all know, April’s almost over. Summer break starts mid-May and ends in July. Until now, we held Periodic Test 1 in July, Half-Yearly in September, PT2 in December, and Finals in February.”

Okay, so far so good.

“But now,” she continues, “we’re changing the schedule. Half of the PT1 will be in the end of April and start of *May*, the other half in July’s beginning. Half-Yearly are moving up to the rest of the *July*. So you can use your summer vacation to actually study. Better than watching TV all day, am I right?”

I blink. Did she just say we’re taking exams during *vacation season*?

“And since you don’t need to study for PT1s *during* break anymore, we’ll be expecting excellence and quality of effort from your side, in the holiday homework. If you have any questions, raise your hand.”

The whole class just sits there, stunned. Like, our brains crashed.

I slowly raise my hand.

She nods, so I stand up. My heart's thumping like I just challenged a final boss.

"Mam, I understand the new schedule," I say carefully. "But... isn't May too early for PT1s? I mean, don't we need more time to actually *learn* the syllabus? And if you take the rest at the beginning of July, we'll have to study in vacations too. They are supposed to be a rest."

There are nods all around me. Soft murmurs of "yeah" echo through the room.

Her eyes narrow. "*Need more time?* You're in eighth grade. A week is more than enough. *Sit down.*"

I sit. Obviously.

"I hope all the students will score above eighty five percent," she says.

Then she turns to Vaishali ma'am, who's now visibly sweating under her gaze. Harsha ma'am gives her a look that could burn through metal.

That's why Regents call her *Harsh-a* mam.

"I also expect all teachers to finish the syllabus on time," she says. And then she just *walks out*.

Silence. Like post-apocalypse level silence. Someone finally whispers, "This is a joke, right?"

But no one laughs.

It's only been the end of second period and all the students are now well aware of what is happening.

All the teachers are giving out a massive chunk of their syllabus to practice as homework so they don't have to teach it and their syllabus could get completed in time.

We thought that Mrs. Harsha's announcement was the only bad news of the day but we didn't expect Mrs. Anjali, Mrs. Mahima and Miss Shruti to come to our class and announce a class test on their subjects' entire syllabus. They haven't even completed teaching it.

And to add some spice, Mrs. Aabha gave us an extra project that has to be submitted by tomorrow. That lady is evil.

I feel like something hit my leg. I look down to see that it's Dharvi's green sharpener.

What do they even think we are? Homework dumps?

-Ostrich

Yeah... It's pretty bad :(

-Momo

Mira and Dharvi may be sitting just in front of our desk but still, we cannot just *talk*.

I write them back.

Here is all the homework me and Chica have listed:

- *Study for the upcoming Pt.1 exams for all six subjects.*
- *Prepare for the Science, Sanskrit and English class test.*
- *Complete the Hindi project which is due tomorrow.*

We have to do this all in just one week. We all also have extracurricular activities and school, which take up most of our day. We have to miss most of our summer vacation to study for half yearly exams and do the seemingly never-ending holidays' homework. Am I missing something?

-Trouble

I just realized that I'll have to miss my cousin's wedding... This might just be the worst day of my life.

-Chica

But we cannot do anything about it, can we? Any suggestions? Trouble?

-Momo

I will tell you if I got anything... Till then, let's just hope that at some point, they will realize that their so called 'criteria' is ridiculous and they will cancel the whole thing.

The bell had rung fifteen minutes ago. Everyone had rushed to the Art Room with loud, clattering feet echoing down the corridor. But I stayed behind.

One arm clutching a messy pile of notebooks, I walk alone toward the school library, my shoes thudding quietly against the tiled stairs. The corridor here always smells of new books.

The library door creaks open like it hadn't been oiled since last century. It is empty. The best kind of silence. The kind that doesn't expect anything from you.

I tiptoe between the rows until I find the right shelf, bending down to shove in the stack of notebooks where the librarian had told me to. "Put them in the empty section by the biographies," she'd said, waving me off with a hand gesture you show the people you want to get rid of.

I turn away to get back to the class but libraries are just too captivating to ignore. I take a look around me.

Thousands of books with thousands of stories. Thousands of thoughts that came from brilliant minds who wrote those pages. Pages full of pretty words.

Alas, I have to go to the Art Room now. I love art as much as reading but not the forced kind.

I'm about to leave when I spot something.

A purple notebook- dog-eared, tucked awkwardly between Ruskin Bond's books. It doesn't belong there. And it doesn't look like it wants to belong anywhere. It doesn't look like a novel. It was our school's notebooks' identical colour. *Purple.*

I know I shouldn't touch it. So obviously, I do. I open it gently. The pages are handwritten- untidy, scratched in blue pen, sometimes black, red even, sometimes pencil. No title. No name. But numbers. And different handwritings in every single one of the numbered lines.

1. *"I'm leaving this school because of everything that's happened this year. If you find this notebook, please don't report it. Keep it as it is. Write in it all of the things you can't speak to anyone. As Anne Frank said, paper has more patience than people. Let this notebook be your safe space. Goodbye."*

Who is this?... Guess I'll never know. I read further.

2. *"My dad told me to smile during report card day. I did. I still got called 'ungrateful' by ma'am. It's been really hard for me to score good grades and"* The sentence is incomplete for some reason, as if he/she couldn't write more.

3. *"I once fainted in the sun during assembly. They told me to drink water and keep marching. I was 10. What else do they expect from a fifth grader?"*

4. *"My brother failed once. They never looked at him the same again. They still don't."*

5. *"They said toppers are role models then humiliated one in front of everyone when she messed up once."*

6. *"I lost my grandmother. They asked if I had my assignment and told me not to be melodramatic. My teacher even gave me a whole lecture on how boys aren't supposed to cry."*

7. *"They teach us 'Teamwork' in value education class then make us compete for 0.5 marks like rivals. That's how I lost my friends a few days ago."*

8. *"Writing poetry was my favorite hobby. They laughed at it and told me it was 'a waste of time'."*

9. *"I was crying after being bullied and targeted by a teacher who had some personal issues with my parents. Instead of apologising, she told the other teachers that I must be on my period and having mood swings."*

10. *"The drinking water hasn't been clean in months. But sure, let's paint the walls again."*

Page after page. Each entry small, one or two lines, as if they couldn't afford the time or bravery to say more. As if even writing this was rebellion.

The students who had come across this must have learned the writing pattern and continued in the same format.

11. *"I had spent the entire night studying with a torch under my blanket. The Sanskrit teacher ripped my notebook for just one spelling mistake because she was having a bad day."*

There was a number 12, clearly. But it's been cut and scribbled over messily.

13. *"I had a panic attack in the washroom. Missed my math test. No one asked if I was okay. They just marked me absent."*

14. *"I scored 93 and they asked what went wrong. I scored 99 and they asked why not 100."*

15. *"My friend started crying during the exam and my teacher told him to behave like a man."*

16. *"I have to leave the school because of the fee escalation. Now my foster family can't afford my eleventh-grade education... and this is my last year here."*

Another page.

17. *"My teacher once said 'Only toppers deserve respect.' So I became one. And I still feel empty."*

18. *"I asked a question. They called it 'arguing'... This issue isn't as big as the previous ones but still hurts."*

19. *"They only remember you exist if you win something for them."*

20. *"My friend fainted. Sir said she should have eaten breakfast and wore lesser hair pins."*

My fingers tightened around the edges. One more paper flip and the rest of the notebook was empty.

21. *"I once got punished for writing with the wrong ink. Not because it was against the rules. But because the teacher had a bad morning."*

22. *"I once drank from the school's drinking water tap and had to suffer from severe cholera. Is this what parents are paying for?"*

23. *"I got bullied for months for my dark complexion. They asked what I did to provoke them."*

24. *“My handwriting is shaky because of my past arm accident. My CT told my parents in the parents’ teachers’ meeting that I’m just ‘unserious’.”*

25. *“I’m scared to sign this because if they find it, I’ll be the next reason on someone else’s page.”*

There was something on the very bottom of the last page, in a different yet darker ink like the underlined words wanted to scream:

If you found this... don’t let it be forgotten.

I close it slowly.

The purple notebook isn’t a diary. It is a graveyard of moments no one had grieved.

Words too small to be noticed, too true to be ignored.

I look around.

Books and shelves. Sunlight trickling in through dusty glass. Somewhere in the distance, a loud shriek of laughter. Life going on, unaware.

I slip the notebook back into its spot between Ruskin Bond’s novels. Exactly where it didn’t belong. And as I walk out, my hands still smell of paper.

But my chest feels full of stories I never wrote...

but have lived.



Chapter 7

A bomb threat saves our class.

It's lunch break and we are half way through the blue Monday. Four periods to go.

Everyone is so distracted by all the new changes that for the first time, I can eat my lunch in peace.

The entire school seems to be unusually quiet today. All of our energy is sucked up by the utterly pointless 'new criteria'.

And the worst part is... *there's nothing we can do about it.*

The scribbled little stories in that purple notebook of those unknown students still wander in my head.

The Rebels just sit there, eating our food, looking at each other time to time.

I feel sad for Preeti. She had been talking about her favorite cousin's wedding for weeks and now she can't even attend it.

Out of nowhere, we hear something. The speakers in the corridors screech with a women's voice and we try to make out the words. There is an announcement.

I hope that it's better from the last one.

“... we request all students to stay calm... teachers are requested to head to the... some of the parents are at the front gate... to the classrooms to get their child... with parent’s identity card verification... do not panic.”

That is all I could understand from the one-minute-long announcement.

Dharvi raises an eyebrow. “What was that, guys?”

The whispered silence of confusion is almost unbearable. We’re too curious.

Preeti shrugs, “Let’s ask Vaishali mam.”

Me and Mira nod.

But soon, all the silence in our school is eaten up by utter chaos. We manage to get the news out of Vaishali mam.

“Umm... students, you don’t need to worry. There is just a false alarm and some of the parents want to pick up their children midday...”

“What kind of false alarm?” someone asks.

“Umm... well, some schools in Northern Delhi have received a bomb threat. And some parents are just overreacting...” Okay. That little word ‘bomb’ was enough to establish a big and panicked mob of students.

Students are shouting and throwing paper balls, pens, pencils, lunchboxes, food, scales, benches, desks and everything they could find. Even other, smaller students seem to be flying in the air today!

The situation is like a mixture of Holi and Hunger Games.

We all know exactly what is going on.

Whenever the *entire student body* acts up... no one, *no one* dares to stop us.

And that's why half of the students are screaming, some are scream-singing and some are fighting each other.

Though, we all know that nothing is going to happen to us but still we have seized the brilliant opportunity to play our parts in this school-brawl-situation-thingy.

And so have the Sakshi group who kick Preeti to the floor the next second.

"Oh, sorry, Preeti. I didn't see you there," Simran says. Liar, liar, grey skirts on fire.

I help Preeti up and the Rebels smile at each other. They started first and now we've got the right to *end* it.

"Don't worry, Simran. It's no problem." Preeti says sarcastically as she opens her plastic bottle, gets it near her mouth and then pours the entire thing on top of Simran's head.

As she gasps for air and tries to recover from the shock,

Preeti says, "Oops! Sorry, Simran! Didn't see you there."

I grin. Seeing me grin, Sakshi intentionally flips her long black braid that hits me like a slap to the face.

Before she can process anything, I remove her rubber band and throw it somewhere in the air.

Now, she looks exactly like the witch she totally is. With the open, greasy, tangled hair, she gets down to her knees and starts searching the floor for the missing rubber band while people step on her long hair.

These girls should know that they can mess with anyone but they certain *cannot* mess with the Rebels.

This isn't some kind of action film fighting, it's rather showing bullies their real position.

Me and Preeti giggle as Sakshi struggles with her hair.

Vedant comes up to me. *My ex-best friend.*

He makes me wonder, how did I even survive that 'friendship' for 5 years in a row that ended up in betrayal.

"Tavisha, you've got to stop this," he says in a tone that neither can be verified as pleading nor threatening.

I sigh. "What do you want, Vedant?"

"I want you to tell your group to stop fighting mine."

"*Your* group or *Sakshi's* group?" I smile as I see him flinch, "besides, who said that we were *fighting*? Simran *by mistakenly* kicked Preeti to the floor. Preeti *by mistakenly* spilled water on her. Sakshi's hair *by mistakenly* touched my face while her rubber band slipped off and went missing.

You see, we can all make mistakes, what truly is necessary that we don't make the same ones again."

He knows perfectly well that the last line was dedicated to the 'friendship' we had in the past.

School family.

"I know I messed up. I just... didn't know how to fix it."

I pick at my nails. "Well, that won't bring Jiya back."

Vedant turns away from me without speaking another word. I turn away too, just to see that Dharvi is standing beside Yash who is tossed on the floor like a used garment. Looks like, just like the rest of her group, Yash also made a try to torment one of us but failed.

The Rebels share a group high-five.

We four feel a little guilty for everything we did to the Sakshi group but we didn't have a choice.

In this world, one can either be a rabbit in a jungle full of jackals or a lion in a jungle full of jackals. The choice is ours.

I see that all the teachers are trying their best to break up the school fights and maintain calmness but they are terribly failing at it. I have never seen our school like this.

The corridor speakers screech again and the school brawl comes to a sudden halt. There is an announcement again. This time, our principal is speaking instead of the woman.

“Teachers are requested to come to the main reception for some instructions,” he says.

All the teachers make way through the crowd and the students calm down a little. Just a little. At least, everyone stops throwing things and people around.

Mrs. Vaishali comes back to the classroom.

“Students, as you all don’t know how to stay calm in a simple situation like this one, today will be considered as a half day,” she says and we all start cheering and shouting.

She seems like she isn’t finished yet so she taps the duster at a wooden desk three times.

The loud voice makes all of us startle as it tears its way across the happy cheers.

She clears her throat. “And before you go, let me tell you that tomorrow will also be a holiday because many parents have requested a school inspection. Honestly, you all are just overcomplicating things...” She says as she sighs trying to hide her smile.

Teachers also like a nice extra holiday.

Mira laughs, “Wow! So, a bomb threat did what petitions never could.”

“That says a lot about this system, doesn’t it?” Dharvi adds.

We start cheering again. Even louder this time.

This is what happens when the entire student body starts to act up against the school. *The more, the better.*

I look around. Sakshi is looking like that witch who escaped Azkaban. Simran is still drenched with water. Yash is scolding Vedant because he didn't help him in his fight with Dharvi.

The Rebels gather together again.

"Let's go, guys!!!" Preeti hoots.

"We now have a good amount of time to complete the Hindi project." I sigh with relief.

"And also a little extra time to prepare for the Pt.1s." Mira says.

"Suiiiiiiiiiiiii," and this is Dharvi.

Though... the new criteria thing is still a problem as none of us want to miss the fun of our summer vacations.

Plus, everything that's wrong this education system.

But there is nothing the students can do about it. We are just kids. We aren't even able to control our own education. And we probably will never be.

A small voice inside my head says something.

What if the students do something about it? Against it.

I reply to that stupid voice, in my head: Against it? We are talking about the education system.

Do you mean the already-broken-education-system?

We are just some students.

Do you mean all four thousand five hundred of you?

You can't just say 'NO' to the school system.

What if, you can.



Chapter 8

Drama? I prefer strategy.

The idea continues to ring inside my head as I sit on my bed.

They can punish a few students for refusing to obey orders, they can even punish an entire class... But can they punish an entire school with more than four thousand students?

No, they can't.

At the end, they'll have to change the orders.

The more, the better.

But I know that thinking about something as big as this is pointless.

To distract myself from the thought, I start studying Civics in Social-Science.

1-minute passes...

2 minutes...

Not even 3 until I admit that only my eyes are reading the contents of the book, not my brain which is still stuck on that thought.

This idea won't stop spinning in my head like a TikTok audio on loop.

I start talking to myself again. As a daydreamer, this happens almost automatically every time I try to concentrate on anything important like studying. It's kind of annoying.

What am I even thinking of?

Revolting against the school.

Why?

You want to free the students from school pressure.

This idea is ridiculous.

And so is the school system.

Why am I the only one who is doing this?

Someone has to take the first step.

Why is no one else taking the first step?

They are afraid.

So am I!

No, you're not.

The main problem is that I don't know what to do.

Take the first step and the others will follow you for sure.

How to take the first step?

By making a plan.

Even if I make a plan, will others follow me?

They will.

How are you so sure?

They are also students. They all face the same unfair situations.

How will I be sure that this 'plan' works?

Trust yourself.

What if we get caught?

Trust your luck... it's worth a shot.

How will I pull off all of this alone?

You're not going to.

Who all will help me with the plan?

Guess.

— — — — —

I am holding my phone in my hand, my finger hovering over the 'call' symbol like it's about to launch a nuclear missile... Except, worse, it might blow up my friend group.

Do it. Call them.

My inner voice says again. She should really shut up.

She has brought me nothing but problems in the past few years like once she told me to throw a senior's school bag out of the bus window when he was picking on my brother.

That was a mistake because his mother turned out to be the Social-Science teacher who would be teaching me in ninth grade. She said that she would remember me.

But then there are also some good times when the voice had incredible ideas.

I can never forget the time when she told me to be friends with Preeti in second grade.

Or the time she told me to defend Dharvi against some students who were insulting her for looking like a boy. I barely knew her at that time in third grade but after that, we quickly became friends.

Another one, when she told me to welcome Mira to the class in sixth grade when she didn't have any friends. The voice told me to be her first friend and help her open up to people.

Now do it. Just click on the 'call' sign.

You sure?

It's now or never.

Sometimes I even forget that the 'voice' is just *me* talking to *myself*. I know that it's weird and creepy.

I finally click on the call symbol.

After a minute, they all pick up.

CHICA: "Hello?"

MOMO: "Hi, Tavisha," Mira sings out as she usually does.

OSTRICH: "What is it?" And this is Dharvi's usual greeting.

TROUBLE (ME): "Hi girls! How is your preparation for Pt.1 going?"

OSTRICH: "Great! So *great* that I am already done with the entire syllabus! Time to move on to the extras." Dharvi says sarcastically.

MIRA: "My preparation is going terrible too, Ostrich,"

CHICA: "Yeah, mine is also on the downside, and now that Tavisha is aware of our Pt.1 forecast, I hope that she is ready to tell us the *real* reason why she called us... Right, Trouble?"

God! We know each other too well.

TROUBLE (ME): "Yeah... so I had this little idea thingy... I... it's like... it would sound a little weird... you might even laugh at me."

CHICA: "Just tell us, Trouble. Your ideas may be weird but they always work."

MOMO: "Yeah! I mean what is weirder than hanging out with an ostrich all day at school?" Mira teases Dharvi.

OSTRICH: "Hey!" She giggles, "but really, just tell us or else I'm hanging up! Is it something about the new criteria? Maybe something to help us memorize the squares and cubes of maths?"

CHICA: "Let her speak, at least, Ostrich. Besides there is nothing we can do about the new criteria."

TROUBLE (ME): “Actually, Chica... there is something we *can* do. Now what I’m going to say will sound a bit ridiculous but please hear it before laughing at me.”

MOMO: “You got it, girl.”

I explain the crazy idea to the Rebels.

They don’t laugh at me which is a surprise. I tell them the exact same words my inner voice told me, carefully skipping the part where I talk to myself.

CHICA: “Trouble, I know you’re mad about the new criteria. Trust me, we all are. But it’s not like we can just... break the system. We have to follow their rules.”

Then comes the voice- not mine, but sharp and clear, cutting through the silence like it had been waiting its whole life to speak.

TROUBLE (ME): “What if we don’t?”

OSTRICH: “Okay... bold. But if we’re going to be rebels, we need a real plan. You got one?”

I shrug (even on a phone call), a little embarrassed but too fired up to care.

TROUBLE (ME): “Sort of? It’s just an outline. Like... mayhem with bullet points. I’m still working on it. Will you guys help?”

MOMO: “So let me get this straight: you want to start a lowkey revolution against the school system... and you want *us* to be your ride-or-die backup?”

TROUBLE (ME): “Basically.”

MOMO: “Girl. That’s insane.” She pauses.

That’s it. I guess my idea was stupid after all. They’re going to refuse. Obviously.

But then, out of nowhere, the call gets revived.

MOMO: “I’m so in.”

OSTRICH: “I’m in too! Let’s light this shit up.”

CHICA: “I’m in three.”

We all laugh at the same time.

There’s a beat of silence after that- not awkward, just heavy in the best way. The kind of silence that feels like trust.

I know them so well, I don’t even need to see their faces. I can *feel* their grins. That wild spark in their eyes. That silent promise that if I jump, they’ll jump too. No questions asked.

They’ve always been the ones ready to stir the pot, to challenge the rules, to chase something bigger than grades or approval. They are the only girls I know who are always up to rebellious acts.

That’s why I call us the *Rebels*.

But with a cause of course.

The voice winks. Somehow.

TROUBLE (ME): “So, now we will get started on the plan.”

CHICA: “Okay, but don’t you think that it will take up a lot of important time that we could use in the Pt.1 preparation?”

TROUBLE (ME): “Yeah, that’s true but that will be the first part of the plan.”

MOMO: “Wait a second. Do you mean that the first part of the plan is ‘finding the time to make a plan?’”

TROUBLE (ME): “I suppose that’s true.”

OSTRICH: “So, where are we going to find this time?”

TROUBLE (ME): “At school.”

MOMO: “At school?”

CHICA: “Tavisha is right, we don’t learn anything useful there anyway and just go there to get homework.”

OSTRICH: “Our parents basically buy homework for us by paying the fees.”

MOMO: “So, what are we going to do? Bunk class? Skip school? Pretend sick?” She says hopefully.

TROUBLE (ME): “No, no and no. We are going to the join board work team.”

“What?” They all say at the same time. This reaction was expected.

OSTRICH: “Isn’t the Sakshi group in it?”

TROUBLE (ME): “Yeah, but they bunk the whole thing anyway so we might as well do the same.”

OSTRICH: “The Sakshi group bunk board work and then come up with an awesome excuse explaining the truth behind the empty board and the teachers blindly believe them but will they believe us too? I don’t think so.”

TROUBLE (ME): “That is true, but I have an idea for that too. You all will go and do exactly what I tell you and I will do all the work. This way, Vaishali mam will think that we all have done the work together.”

CHICA: “Are you sure you can handle this?”

MOMO: “We would only get forty-five minutes to do that, you know, if your work doesn’t stand up to Mrs. Vaishali’s expectations, she will definitely take us down from this post.”

TROUBLE (ME): “I promise you, Momo. *Me and my art skills never betray.*”

MOMO: “Okay, we trust you... now that we have a plan to get the time to make the plan and a plan to perform the plan... What’s next?”

I try to ignore the fact that she said the word ‘plan’ four times in a single sentence.

Now it sounds like a foreign word.

TROUBLE (ME): “Actually, I have already come up with most of the plan.”

OSTRICH: “Wait, what? When?”

TROUBLE (ME): “Before this call and while we were talking. Wasn’t able to study.”

CHICA: “She’s a mastermind at making plans.” Preeti says in a buttery voice.

OSTRICH: “Since when did you go from a daydreamer to a strategist, Trouble?”

TROUBLE (ME): “Happens.”

MOMO: “What are we going to call this thing anyway? We can’t just use the word ‘plan’ in everything. It sounds like a foreign word now.”

We all share the same thoughts.

CHICA: “Okay. Okay. Okay....” Preeti wonders out loud, “how about *Pencil Revolution*. Thoughts?”

OSTRICH: “Sounds like an animated movie where a pencil learns karate.”

TROUBLE (ME): “How about... ‘Request for change?’” I say, feeling stupid.

OSTRICH: “It sounds like you want a grocery store cashier to return your change amount.”

MOMO: “How about ‘Mission: Kill Timetable. It’s violent. My type.”

TROUBLE (ME): I laugh. “Please, if we go down, I want be remembered for something cooler than ‘Misson: Kill Timetable.’

CHICA: “True.”

OSTRICH: "Notebook Ninjas?"

MIRA: "Only if we get cool codenames. I'm sharpener."

CHICA: "Bro, no one's calling you a sharpener. You're obviously a Momo."

TROUBLE (ME): "Girls! Please be like serious-ish."

CHICA: "Trouble's right, guys. We need real ideas. How about 'Revenge of the benches'?"

TROUBLE (ME): "What does that even mean?"

CHICA: "The benches are tired of being sat on. So are we. Metaphoric."

TROUBLE (ME): "I swear if I hear one more metaphor, I'm leaving."

MOMO: "Wait, wait... 'Syllabus Sabotage'."

OSTRICH: "Sounds like a band name from the 90s."

TROUBLE (ME): "Uh... 'Great Educational Revolt'?"

OSTRICH: "So like a history chapter title?"

CHICA: "Canteen Rebellion'?... but we don't have a canteen, though."

OSTRICH: "'Attendance attack'?... we strike by... not showing up."

MOMO: "'Project: I forgot my homework.'?"

CHICA: "Absolutely not."

While we all try to think of a cool name, my eyes land on the still-open Civics chapter in the Social-Science book. I notice a picture of a big, chaotic group of farmers.

Beneath the picture were written two words.

A strike. My inner voice reads for me.

“Students’ Strike.” I declare.



Chapter 9

A little truth and a lot of lies.

*I*hate new seat arrangements.

Last year, we were made to sit in four different rows according to our four houses during the Annual Regent's Heights Sports week.

Too bad that the Rebels are in completely different houses. Mira is a part of the Sapphire Hall, Dharvi is a Ruby, and Preeti, a Topaz. I'm in the Opal Hall.

I'm not sure but I think the school had put us in different houses based on our personality traits when we first got enrolled here.

The Sapphires are usually calm and calculating. Mostly toppers at logical subjects like Maths and Physics.

The Rubies are fierce and passionate. They always bag 1st position at sports but usually have a high temper.

The Topazes are kind and optimistic. Every Topaz that I've met in the school is like a bundle of laughter in a human form.

And then come the Opals... We are a bit... strange, I guess. I'm not sure if Opals are the best at anything, other than art and creativity...which isn't considered a valuable

skill in most schools. And it doesn't obtain us any marks on the score sheet.

For every Opal, there is a thin line between being a genius and being a freak... I guess I hop on that line and use it as a swing.

Now, because the Pt.1 exams are approaching, all of us will have to sit roll-number wise.

It hits me whenever I think of it.

The Pt.1 exams are approaching. In just seven days.

It's going to be fine. *We're* going to be fine.

I have gone through the whole course of the Pt.1 exams. Failing the exams isn't what I'm afraid of. The thought of my friends failing terrifies me more. Preeti, Mira, Dharvi, Lavina, Shanaya, Divya... and everyone else too.

The school throws so many ridiculous problems at us.

One after another. Like stones. Burning stones. Burning stones that we have to carry on our backs while dancing on broken glass. At least we would get some sympathy by doing *that*, but in reality, we are expected to be perfect students who are grateful for this kind of 'education'.

Most of the schools only care about their social status and profit rate.

Many of the parents only care about their child's perfection.

For many of the teachers, a classroom is just a seven-to-three workspace... not a duty to shape children and their futures.

No one cares about the child's proper upbringing.

They don't aim to create individuals. They create copies. A society of adults who think a certain way, fit a certain role, and rarely ask *why*.

From the moment we're young, we're taught that the world is divided, countries are labeled good or bad, people are labeled this or that.

We're taught gender roles: boys as providers, girls as nurturers. I've never seen a boy dressed as a nurse or a girl as a cricketer on Roleplay Day. We're assigned colors before we even understand who we are: pink for girls, blue for boys.

We grow up learning to raise our hands before speaking, to ask for permission before moving, to walk in straight lines, to appear "correct."

Limits surround us long before we learn the word for them.

But all adults were once children... children with boundless curiosity. That's what humans are born as, after all: the most curious creatures on Earth.

Everyone sees us as students. Only students. What they forget is that we are also *children*.

They say childhood is the best time of one's life, yet where is ours? Our parents' generation was perhaps the

last to live theirs freely. Ours comes wrapped in competition and performance.

Once, I asked my mother why, and she told me, “Diamonds are made under pressure.” But diamonds are also hard. Cold. Cut into identical shapes. The same hue, the same edges.

And some of us don’t become diamonds at all. We crack under that pressure, and no one talks about that.

Not every educational institute is wrong, though. Some truly nurture individuality, giving children time, space, and freedom to grow at their own pace. To become who they are meant to be, not who they’re told to be

You are the greatest project you’ll ever work on.

On the other hand, some programs suffocate their students by creating invisible cages around them and expecting them to be *grateful* for it.

That is my main reason for trying to put this plan into work. To conduct a *Students’ Strike*. Freeing everyone from this pressure.

I will take the first step and the others will follow me for sure.

Now I don’t need a sense of sureness by talking to myself.

I know what I’m doing.

I am on the right path.

It's CTP period and Mrs. Vaishali is going through some papers.

We are looking forward to approach her to seek her permission for joining board work.

Mira was afraid to do so... you can guess why.

Vaishali mam doesn't like her at all. In fact, she hates her. So, with a heavy heart, I asked her to do something that the Rebels never do.

Apologize to the teacher when it wasn't even her fault.

She is so supportive that she agreed saying that it was her own fault that she behaved like that in front of the class teacher and it's up to her to make it right.

We wanted to accompany her in doing so but she insisted on going alone.

Their conversation lasted around five minutes and then she came to my seat saying, "She forgave me."

It kind of hurts but it's also essential for the strategy.

I had asked Mira personally why she supported me for this reckless, risky plan at every step without even knowing it fully.

She'd simply said- "I have always wanted to become a teacher when I grow up but I can't be a part of *this* system."

"But why do you trust me so much?" I had asked.

She smiled, "You know, Tavisha, at my older school, no one really cared about the students. No one cared

about me. It was the same in this school too. The only thing that changed was that you three cared. And that was enough for me.”

After a few minutes, I approach Mrs. Vaishali for the board work permission.

“Good morning mam, I just wanted to ask for your permission for something,” I say.

“Permission? For what?” she asks.

“Permission to join board work,” I say.

“Why do you want to join board work, Tavisha?” She asks me with a blank face. I quickly think up my answer.

“Mam, it’s not just me who wants to join. Dharvi, Mira and Preeti are also interested in joining it. We all want to do something good for the school. Every day when I walk through the corridor, I notice that blank board. It’s like... it talks to us and asks for our help. Besides, the other class boards are almost completed,” I say.

Talks to us? Who am I kidding? Lie after lie. I am not fond of telling lies like the Sakshi group but I have to do it for the Students’ Strike.

I’ll have to do it again and again and I don’t care if the world calls me a liar. I’m ready to become one if it means that we’ll succeed.

The only point that wasn’t a lie was that the board assigned to our class in the corridor is completely empty and the other boards are almost done.

That seems to grab Mrs. Vaishali's attention so I continue to push further.

"Mam, if you remember, I also made the center piece of our class board," I say.

The reminder of my tree seems to do the job.

And, Mrs. Vaishali says- "Oh, right! *You* made the tree. Okay, you have my permission. You can join board work," she says cheerfully.

"Yes, me *and* the Rebe- I mean the other three girls," I say, indirectly asking for confirmation.

"No, I mean *only you*, Tavisha. Why do you need the other girls?" she asks.

Because they are going to help me hold a strike against the school, saying 'no' to the extra pressure by anonymously freeing the students so that they can have a better and more productive childhood and teenage.

I smile and bite my lip.

Instead, I say-

"Mam, the corridor board is bigger than the class board, I'll need some help for a better speed and quality of work."

Another lie. I tell the guilt in my stomach to go away. I hate lying but I should really get used to it now.

"Uh... Sakshi and some students are already working on it, they can help you," she suggests.

Ask the *Sakshi group*? For *help*? Never.

She really has no clue.

The Sakshi group does nothing but use the time given to them to bunk CTP in the most professional way.

They also do it to flatter the teacher with their so called ‘help’ and then come up with lame excuses to explain the reason for an empty board.

I can’t really blame them. I mean... we are also going to do the same thing. *Partially*, and for a good cause.

I will handle the board work on my own, relying on my art and craft skills and the other Rebels will carry out the plan that I made.

I can see that Vaishali mam doesn’t buy that excuse. *In order to put someone in, you first have to take someone out.*

I hate acting like a snitch but I need her acceptance on this one so I tell her the truth. Well, *some* of the truth about her ‘prized pupil’.

“Mam, did Sakshi tell you why she couldn’t get started on the background for the board?” I ask.

“Yes,” She answers, trying to recall her conversation with Sakshi, “she told me that the purple chart paper, that we had kept for making the background, went missing... someone probably took it. She will arrange it today,” she answers, shooting a suspicious look.

I give a slight smile and stride towards the cupboard that is used to store the board work material, besides her chair.

“I can assure you, mam, that the chart papers are kept in this cupboard. I just need the keys to unlock them.”

She hesitates for a moment and then she asks Divya to get the keys for the cupboard.

“Mam, I don’t have them,” Divya says.

“What do you mean, you don’t have them? You are supposed to keep them safe at all times!” she roars.

Divya visibly shakes.

I feel bad for her as I know that it isn’t her fault that the keys are not with her. I also know who really is at fault here. “Do have an explanation, Divya?” she asks, “cat got your tongue?” Classic dialogue, that one.

Divya fixes her eye glasses and explains-

“Mam, I thought that the keys are with you. You asked for them so, I gave them to you,” she says nervously.

“I didn’t ask for them. Who told you that?”

“Sakshi did,” me and Divya say at the same time.

They both look at me.

“How did you know that?” Divya asks me.

Common sense? How haven’t they pieced it together yet?

I tell Mrs. Vaishali, exactly what the Sakshi group have been up to and she then calls Sakshi to her desk.

She tries to hide the surprise on her face when she sees me standing next to the class teacher.

She is even more surprised when Vaishali mam says this- “Sakshi, do you have the keys to the cupboard?”

“No mam, Divya should be having them,” she says.

“She claims that you took them from her saying that I wanted them,” she says in an explain-your-reason-voice.

“Mam, you asked me yesterday to recheck the cupboard for the missing chart paper so I had to ask for the keys,” Sakshi says with ~~a smile~~ a fake smile.

“Okay, then return the keys to mam,” I interrupt.

She gives me a glare. An unspoken threat. I ignore it.

I’m not scared of her glares and threats. And I won’t tolerate her bullying towards any other girl... which also includes Divya.

“Yes, Sakshi. Give them back,” Vaishali mam demands.

“Mam, I can assure you that I returned them safely to Divya.”

“But I don’t have them, mam,” Divya says.

Sakshi clears her throat. “Let’s check her bag then.”

“What!?” me and Divya say at the same time (again).

Vaishali mam is hesitating at first but then she says- “Reet,” she calls out a name, “check Divya’s bag for any keys.”

This is so wrong. And even Vaishali mam knows that it is wrong. Guilt is spread wide across her face.

Instead of questioning Sakshi, she is questioning Divya, who has no hand in this mess.

“Mam, searching her bag would be an invasion to her privacy... Can we just talk with her and figure out what’s going on?” I say in a pleading tone.

“Uh, no, Tavisha. It’s good that you think like that but this matter needs to be resolved before it complicates more. Besides, there is nothing such as ‘privacy’ here. You all are at a *school*. You all are *students*,” she says, irritated.

Nothing like privacy? What kind of school doesn’t respect the privacy of students? *Regent’s Heights*.

She continues- “Besides that, the keys to my locker were also in there. Sakshi is right. We have to search.”

Sometimes I think that Sakshi secretly brews potions and feeds them to the teachers somehow in order to make them follow her orders brainlessly.

Maybe that’s why we all call her by the handle- ‘witch’.

Reet continues to search Divya’s bag.

I’m pretty sure that she doesn’t have the keys with her. I’ve known her since a very long time. She is one of the kindest girls I know (and completely opposite from the Sakshi group).

It’s gotten much quitter here. Just mumbles and whispers.

I turn to realize that we have the attention of the whole class. They all are looking towards us now.

Mira, Preeti, Dharvi, Vedant, Simran, Yash, Arun, Kritika, Tushar, Nysa, Utkarsh, Sanika, Nandini, Kiara... and everyone else is trying to figure out what's going on.

Divya seems to realize that too. So, she gives me a nervous glance. I return her a reassuring smile followed by a single nod.

It's going to be okay. I mouth.

She swallows and nods.

Reet is down to the very last pocket.

She looks up with a face that's not so easy to read. I am assuming (and hoping) that she tells Vaishali mam that the keys are not there, *but then I look at Sakshi.*

She is smiling. *Smiling.* Oh no-

Reet looks towards Divya, in an apologetic manner and holds out her right hand for all of us to see.

Two silver-coloured figures come into view.



Chapter 10

Blame Game.

The key to the cupboard.

And the key to Mrs. Vaishali's locker.

Both held together in a bunch by a thin blue-coloured plastic ring.

There is no doubt that these keys are the missing ones.

Were the missing ones. Now, they are right in front of us. They were kept in Divya's bag.

The Rebels are confused too. Divya's face has turned pale. She couldn't have done this.

Everyone looks shocked. Everyone, except the Sakshi group. Sakshi, Simran, and Yash look relieved, even satisfied. Looks like another one of their schemes resulted in a total success.

I notice the expression on Vedant's face which, surprisingly, isn't like the rest of their group. In fact, he looks like he's upset. I must be imagining it.

This is the same boy who laughed when his best friend got humiliated badly.

Vaishali mam is the second one (after me) to recover from the surprise.

She walks towards Reet and takes the keys from her hand, checking them one more time, just in case.

“I believed in you, Divya.” She sighs. “I’m sure that you are well aware of the consequences of lying to the teacher, stealing school property, hiding it and even wrongly blaming a classmate for all of it.”

Divya is stammering. “N-no, I-I... How d-did those?” Her words are left hanging in the air.

I have to defend her so, I step forward.

“Mam, can I say something?”

“Tavisha, please sit down. I know that you want to help but there is nothing that we can do here.”

“Just hear me out. Please!”

She sighs again and puts her lips into a tight straight line; eyelids half closed and rests her weight on the teacher’s desk. This kind of posture made by teachers recites the unspoken words- *‘Go on and get over with it.’*

I clear my throat.

“Mam, if Divya really was the one who took the keys, she must have a reason for doing it right?”

That’s a good start... I think.

She looks bored and tired but she turns her gaze to Divya, anyways.

“You got anything to say to that?”

“I didn’t have a reason... I didn’t even do it!” She says, finally finding the right words.

“Urgh... this again.” Mrs. Vaishali mutters.

My class starts to laugh and make fun her for their own entertainment...

“Stop lying, Divya.” Someone says.

“You’re pathetic.”

“A thief!”

“She is so strange.”

“What a freak!”

These people are the student body.

God! How on earth are they going to be a major part of the revolt if they can’t even stay united?

Ignoring them, I ask Divya to continue explaining what exactly happened. I will not let her get suspended for something she didn’t do. Not on my watch.

But then... the bell rings. Urghhh!

“This is not over yet, girls. I want you three to come with me. Sorting this out has now become a necessity,” Mrs. Vaishali commands, “follow me.”

Oh, come on! I just wanted her to remove the Sakshi group from board work so that the Rebels could step in. That’s the reason I asked for the keys. I knew that she stole them.

I know that Sakshi didn't want to get started on the board, that's why she came up with yet another great excuse for bunking class.

What I didn't realize was that she was already a step ahead.

As we three follow Mrs. Vaishali to the staff room, I try to imagine what might have really happened. Starting by retracing Sakshi's footsteps.

She didn't want to do the board work, so she stuffed all the purple chart paper into the cupboard, and Divya locked it. Seeing that Divya had the keys, Sakshi must've realized that she couldn't just pretend the chart papers were missing. They were literally right there.

She must have realized that she only has two options-*either hide the papers somewhere else or hide the keys so no one would be able to open the cupboard.*

The first option is tricky as people can witness her moving around with the same purple chart paper rolls that are supposed to be missing.

The second option is also not fully convenient because after some time the school staff would probably break down the lock or give orders to make a new key.

So, Sakshi being a witch, came up with a third one.

Put the blame on someone else.

She must have told one of her little comrades to put the keys inside Divya's bag so that, if and when, the absence of the keys is noticed, she would have someone

to blame. This way Divya would be the one responsible for the missing keys.

Not her.

Besides, Sakshi hates Divya for being prettier than her. Well, there are around 4.09 billion females on the planet. She should be hating all of them if that's the case.

In my opinion, if a person is beautiful from the outside but not from the inside, he/she would still be ugly.

I wish the world could agree with me.

After walking for 5 minutes in our school's huge corridors, we reach an empty classroom on Vaishali mam's lead. Sakshi and I take the opposite seats and Divya takes the middle one.

The witch continues to give me death stares. I ignore her again. *These silent threats won't work on me, Sakshi.*

I'm not afraid of her. She's just an attention seeker who tries her best to bully others for popularity.

Besides, the best way to hurt a mean girl's ego is to smile pitifully at their silly little tries to appear 'cool'.

"Now, will you girls finally tell me what happened?" Mrs. Vaishali asks, "if you're not going to, then I'll have to check the CCTV cameras." She says in a low, threatening tone.

I could actually laugh right now.

Literally everyone knows that the school cameras never work. They are just for show. And besides, if they really were working, Vaishali mam would be checking them right now. And perhaps Sakshi would be clever enough to change her plan in order to avoid getting busted.

Divya starts first.

“Mam, yesterday, Sakshi came to my desk and asked me for the keys. When I asked her for the reason, she told me that you asked for them. I insisted on going and giving you the keys myself, assuring that they are in safe hands.

But Sakshi started saying that I don’t trust her and that I am not a good friend. I still didn’t buy that and went alone but then *you* told me to give *her* the keys because she wanted to check the cupboard for the missing chart paper. She never returned them and started to pretend today like she did.” She explains.

Vaishali mam looks towards Sakshi. Now it’s the witch’s turn to speak. She flips her long dark braid to a side.

“I would just like to say that it wasn’t me who took the keys, mam. It wasn’t Divya either. She would never do that. It was actually Tavisha. She is the key thief.”

“What?!” Me and Divya say that together again. For the third time.

Vaishali mam looks astonished at her claim too. All heads turn towards me. But Sakshi is not done.

“Yes! She told me that she had joined board work and asked me for the keys. I handed them to her and thought that she had returned them to you or Divya. She never did, unfortunately, and hid them in Divya’s bag instead. It took me a while to realize what she did. Tavisha lied to me and stole the keys to put the entire blame on Divya.”

That witch! She really suits the title everyone gave her. How dare she accuse me like that?

Vaishali mam shoots me a look of disappointment. Is she actually convinced by *that*?

“Tavisha... really?” She sighs, “I expected better from you.”

“Mam, I had nothing to do with it! I didn’t even know that the keys were in Divya’s bag. And putting this kind of blame on her? I would never do it to Divya!” I am at the urge of shouting now but I have to keep my voice in control.

This problem is driving everyone crazy. Sakshi created the problem. In fact, she *is* the problem.

“Mam, Tavisha didn’t steal the keys. Sakshi is lying!” Divya is defending me.

Vaishali mam is not quite convinced by her statement.

“Tavisha, do you have any proof that you didn’t steal the keys?” She asks.

“I-I don’t have any proof but you just have to believe me. Besides, why would I even steal the keys? I wasn’t even a part of the board work team. It was Sakshi who

stole them because she didn't want to get started on the background of the board. I bet you anything that the purple chart paper is still in the cupboard with rest of the board material. It has always been there." I explain.

Finally understanding my point, Vaishali mam sends Divya to check for the chart paper.

After some time Divya comes back with the purple chart paper rolls. A sense of relief takes over me as I shoot a sharp look at Sakshi. *Now it's my time to smile.*

Vaishali mam is so surprised. She looks like she saw a pig fly. Seriously! What is wrong with these people? Why do they believe so strongly that whatever Sakshi says is the truth. Guess that it will always remain a mystery for me.

"Sakshi," she gasps out her name. "How could you? You lied to me in order to bunk CTP! This is absurd. How long have you been doing it? Using my trust to violate the school rules?"

"Since the very first day." I add in. Now we're on track.

Sakshi turns to look at me with a snappy look on her face.

Vaishali mam has put on a mixed expression of down heartedness and downright anger.

She leaves the classroom without further explanation. For the next 5 minutes, me, Divya and Sakshi are left alone in an atmosphere of stiff, uncomfortable silence.

Vaishali mam enters the classroom again. She looks pretty frustrated.

“Girls, as you all know that stealing or hiding a school property is a punishable offence according to the rules. The punishment differs at the value of the object. The key bunch was pretty important because alongside the key to the board work cupboard, it also held the key to my locker which consisted of my phone, my purse and other important stuff.

And don’t even get me started on the ‘putting the blame on a classmate’ part because that would lead you straight to the exit door of the school, closing its entrance to you forever. And yes, by that I mean you’ll get *expelled*.”

Vaishali mam pauses explaining her threats for a moment, letting the word ‘expelled’ echo through the almost empty classroom.

Divya seems convinced by her words because she starts to shiver again.

Sakshi, on the other hand, seems pretty relieved that the cameras of the school don’t work.

“So, let me tell you my final decision,” she continues.

A long pause again. That lady is really testing our patience after we bothered her so much.

I am a little nervous as I don’t think I can pull off my plan for the Students’ Strike after getting expelled.

If I get expelled, Sakshi would face the consequences of my revenge. (After I figure out what to do with her from outside the of school).

“My final decision is... no one gets expelled.” Vaishali mam finally says.

And at that, Divya gives out a long, loud sigh, like she had held that breath from centuries. Sakshi rolls her eyes at her reaction.

“Mam, but why aren’t you doing anything against Tavisha?” Sakshi sounds so annoyed that it feels like she might jump up to strangle me anytime now. “She stole the keys and blamed Divya for it.”

She is talking like I’m actually the one who did it.

“I did not do it!” I retort.

“Yes! Tavisha did nothing.” Divya says.

“Enough!” Vaishali mam roars. She takes a deep breath. “See, I do not know who took them. I also don’t know why you keep blaming each other when you have got no proof!”

She eyes Divya. “*You* will continue to keep my keys. *Safer this time*, I expect.” Divya nods.

Mrs. Vaishali looks towards me and Sakshi. She sighs as if she sees a load of luggage that she has to carry on a long onfoot journey across the Sahara desert.

“Tavisha, you and the other three girls you mentioned earlier can join the board work. You have my permission.

As for Sakshi, I can't trust you and your companions with this work so, you all will be working for the board but under the supervision of Tavisha.

The board completion is due in just two days. Besides, I have no other volunteers from the class. No other option but to trust both of you and your friends to work together without creating any sort of havoc." Vaishali mam says plainly. "Now you both can head back to your class."

I. Did. Not. Expect. That. Sakshi is shocked too.

At first, I thought that she was going to punish us. And now, she has made me the head of board work.

I personally have zero interest in this position but it feels like some sort of blessing because it would make the second step of my plan a lot easier.

That makes me realize...

I did it! I made it to the second step of my plan! I can't wait to tell this to the Rebels.

Then the second realization hits me...

If the first step was that difficult, I wonder what other problems are waiting for us.

Then the third...

Now that Sakshi has been proven to be a liar, Vaishali mam isn't trusting her anymore. She might think that whatever happened was because of me. I will become the center of her hatred. She has always hated me but now,

she will despise me. And she is still the part of board work. If she gets to know about my plan, I'm doomed.

We both head towards our class.

Sakshi is scowling at me like I'm the one who did everything.

I still can't believe that she did *all that* just because she was too lazy to work on the board or perhaps, she did not have the skills but still wanted to impress the teacher.

When we enter the class, the Rebels are looking at me with a glint of hope in their eyes. I give them a thumbs up. They grin back.

As a writer it's my habit to make a list about everything.

From the books I have read to the places I have visited. *Literally everything.*

So, I decide to make another small one. This one's a secret. I name it "Students' Strike". My first account in the thumb sized notebook-

First step: Joining board work.

Completed with excellence.



Chapter 11

Blind spots.

Today, the Rebels have come to school with high hopes and all four of us are feeling really positive about our plan for the Students' Strike.

Though, Preeti, Dharvi and Mira are complaining about not getting a chance to help me with the first step.

"Don't worry guys, there is a long way ahead of us. Whatever happened yesterday was just the first step. We have to walk the rest of the journey together, don't we?" I reply cheerfully and hop on top of a desk.

"Just like best friends?" Mira asks, knowing the answer.

"*Best friends forever.*" Preeti replies with a dreamy smile.

"Eww! Girly girls." Dharvi cringes.

I try to restrain my laugh at her reaction.

"That's not girly, Ostrich! Momo and I are tomboys too, you know?" Preeti retorts.

Mira nods as she reddens. They both are clearly embarrassed at being called 'girly'.

I can't hold it anymore. I burst into laughter.

Preeti strikes at the back of my head with a book after being more embarrassed.

“Ouch!” I say, even though it didn’t hurt.

I can’t help but giggle.

It’s not like I can’t live without wearing frills. But I’m also not comfortable wearing baggy, black and white clothes like my tomboy friends wear.

In school, wearing a uniform is mandatory. It’s probably one of the only rules that are sensible. Besides learning pressure, the hardest part of the school is fitting in.

If normal clothing was allowed, fashion would have become the most important thing in our school. All the students would have to wear expensive clothing just because they wouldn’t want to get bullied. For many of the students, this would be unaffordable.

Now, I’m not talking about compulsory hairstyles or mandatory nails or no makeup rules... those stupid guidelines are made for blind obedience. I don’t get the obsession adult teachers have with the appearance of a student who is three to four times younger than themselves.

The most important factor that the school uniform provides is the unity amongst students. It gives us a sense of identity. It unites us all and shows us that no matter how different we are, we are all students and we are on the very same page (pun intended).

It's just like sports; the members of a team wear a matching jersey. We all wear the same uniform to be reminded that we're a team.

We are *the Student Body*.

I take a deep breath and try to visualize how more than four thousand blues, greys and whites would look like, while performing the strike.

The image comes out in a blur accompanied by the fear of failure. It sends shivers down my back.

It's our time to shine! (while being undercover).

CTP has just started and we have been instructed by Vaishali mam to start doing the board work.

I grab my small, thumb-sized, secret notebook to keep track of everything. I put in an account-

Second step: Finding blind spots.

I put it in my pocket with a pen, without anyone noticing.

Every blind spot is a door and every camera is a lock... we just have to find the right keys.

My group keeps asking me to tell them the entire plan but I'll explain everything later.

Walls have ears.

The Rebels head out of the class. We swiftly move through the corridor. The board is not far from our classroom.

Just when we start to happily wonder whether the Sakshi group forgot about board work or not, we spot them right behind us.

I try not to get demotivated.

Dharvi clears her throat and whispers- “We have to try our best to stay undercover. If they knew about our plan... we’re so dead.” She runs a hand in her boy-like hair.

“Yep, it’s true,” says Mira. “Sakshi can- *will* definitely snitch on us if she knew.”

“*Not only Sakshi*. It’s not like the rest of her group consists of saints,” I add.

“Trouble?” Preeti grabs on my hand. “Are you sure whatever we’re doing is worth the risk?”

“Yes,” I reply, keeping my voice as low as a whisper.

“That’s why we’ll have to be *as sly as a fox*, which, is usually Sakshi’s field of excellence.”

“Uh-huh.” Preeti nods as she releases my hand.

As we reach there, the Rebels scornfully look at the empty board and then, we give the same look to the wickedly grinning Sakshi group.

They look so proud of themselves for leaving behind the work they were supposed to have done on their own.

I sigh. It's due in just 2 days. Now, *I'll* have to complete the whole thing while the Rebels carry out the plan.

I have instructed them well; I know I can trust them.

The hardest part isn't doing everything myself; it's actually the part where I have to keep an eye on the Sakshi group.

"Let's start." I announce, being the head of the board work team. Sakshi rolls her eyes.

The first task for me is to give my group an opening to make their escape.

"Tavisha," Simran calls out, "it looks like we have forgotten the stapler pins. Let us just get those, okay?"

I knew this was going to happen and I'm not that easy to be fooled. All they want to do is bunk again.

"No, thanks." I smile and take out four packets of stapler pins out of the material bag. "We have them."

Her fake smile drops into a real defeated frown.

"Sakshi and Vedant, you both will assemble the background with the purple chart paper."

Vedant sighs but follows my orders anyways. Sakshi is still scowling at me.

"What are you waiting for? Chop-chop." I clap my hands twice. She has no choice but to obey me so she miserably joins Vedant.

It's hard to maintain a straight face.

“Yash and Simran? You both will cut out the borders. *Neatly*, I expect.”

Yash looks like a bull who is ready to attack. On the other hand, Simran looks like someone has slapped her.

I just love to observe the looks on their faces.

Whenever they are around the Rebels, *they burn*.

Sakshi clears her throat. “Tavisha? What will *you* and *these three* do? You can’t just expect your job to be here, standing on top of our heads, commanding us and doing nothing yourself.” Then she makes her *bold statement* to seem like a joke by laughing.

I don’t laugh. I don’t reply. I don’t *blink* either. I stare at her, into her dark brown eyes. Being expressionless.

The Rebels are quiet; Sakshi’s group is quiet.

Sakshi swallows, hard. I can see her tremble and sweat while she still makes effort to smile and hide her vulnerability.

Silence rings through the corridor. There is no one here except for the eight of us.

The stiff stare is definitely making Sakshi uncomfortable.

I. still. don’t. blink.

“Okay!” I cheerfully shout and make Sakshi startle.

I turn away to face the others. “Let’s get back to work everyone! The board isn’t going to decorate itself.”

Preeti whispers in my ear- “What just happened?”

I grin. “What?”

“*The staring part.* I mean, what was *that*? Sakshi still looks like she had a trip to the spiritual realm. Did you put her in some kind of trance? You got to explain.”

I laugh. “I have the scary stare. Inherited it from my mother. Runs in the family.”

She gives out a short, strange laugh. “Weirdo.”

I shrug.

Now, back to the plan. Since I have pulled out my scary stare card, the queen of witches (i.e. Sakshi) would be in line for quite some time. So, now’s my chance.

I eye the big cloth bag that I had brought here, pretending that it was heavy when it only had a few crumbled papers inside.

I hope that the other Rebels are also good at acting.

“Hey, I think this bag is no use to us.” I look at my group.

“Keep this back in the cupboard, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” Dharvi says and the others nod, getting my point.

“*It’s very heavy.*” I already instructed them that the empty bag was supposed to be ‘heavy’ but it’s never bad to give a little reminder.

“Tavisha,” Simran practically sings out my name and gets on her puppy eyes. “Why are you sending all three of them instead of *me*? Do you think I’m so vain?”

Yes. Yes, Simran, you are.

My lips curve into a fake smile and I start talking to her in a baby voice-

“The bag is very heavy, Simran. And, you’re so thin and petite that it can crush your pretty face under its weight.”

With this girl, I can’t help the sarcasm. At first, she looks happy at the ‘compliment’ but then she realizes that I was just mocking her.

I clear my throat. “Now, the Rebe- I mean, Preeti, Mira and Dharvi. Please proceed.”

It’s weird calling them with their actual names instead of Chica, Momo and Ostrich. In my head, they sound okay but they sound funny coming out of my mouth.

The Rebels pick up the bag together. Mira takes the right end; Dharvi takes the left and Preeti put her hands under it.

They make fake grunting voices until they move out of sight. *That was smooth.* I sigh in relief.

No one cares what we’re doing to get the board done... all they care about is the final product. And that’s an advantage for us this time.

Now, I’m left with Sakshi, Simran, Yash and Vedant in the empty, echoing corridor.

I just realized just how lonely I feel without the Rebels.

Together, we're a team.

A team of four, Rebels to the core.

And now I have to deal with these witches.

At least, witch number one- I mean, *Sakshi*, is still in the trance that I put her in. Something tells me that for at least today, I have attained freedom from her nonsense.

As for her group, Simran is a nincompoop so she is somewhat easy to handle. Yash only does what Sakshi tells him to do and Vedant is a coward. He always has been one.

So, for today at least, it's smooth sailing.

The bell rings and CTP comes to an end.

Sakshi grabs her stuff and literally brisk walks away, not even bothering to wait for her group. It amuses me.

You might think that I'm cruel to these girls but considering what they did and continue doing to others at Regent's Heights, you would realize that it serves them right.

Me and the Rebels joined the I.V group (Intervention group) around one year ago, just to protect others from Sakshi's bullying.

I never really told anyone this but, before I got the first letter from the I.V group leader, I was actually afraid of Sakshi. She used to terrify me.

Though, she never really targeted me until I started protecting the victims of her bullying.

The memories of Jiya gave me strength. Enough encouragement to go against the most popular girl of our batch.

I wasn't always like I am now. Around two years ago, looking back at those memories, I realize just how invisible I was.

We three (me, Jiya, Vedant) were underdogs but we were happy anyways.

I had no confidence because I never thought that standing against bullies was possible.

The old me could never think in a million years that she would attempt to free the students from school pressure and the corrupted education system in grade eighth.

But that's what I have become now.

Not invisible.

But a refuser.

A Rebel.

"Tavisha." The sound of my name drags me away from my thoughts.

I turn back to see that the Rebels have returned with the 'heavy' bag. Now, Dharvi is carrying it, using just one hand.

"Is the coast clear?" Preeti hisses.

I look around. No member of the Sakshi group is in sight.

“Yes.”

They sprint towards me.

“Tell me everything,” I say.

“Yeah, I’ll tell you,” Mira offers. “So, we have made a map of every corridor in our school. As you know, our school is kind of enormous so, we could only finish mapping four out of nine corridors. There are four buildings in which three are interconnected, each of them has three floors.”

“Umm... I thought everyone knew that already.” I interrupt.

Dharvi lands a harmless punch on my shoulder. “Let her complete.”

“Sorry.” I say and we slowly start walking back towards our class.

“Yeah, so, as I was saying,” Mira continues, “We found out that there are no specific number of cameras and fire alarms in one corridor. For example, there are four cameras and two fire alarms in the corridor we are standing in right now but the corridor downstairs has five cameras and only one fire alarm.”

She pauses, giving me an opening to speak.

“Uh, okay. That’s strange but it’s also really inconvenient for us. I hoped that all the placements would

be the same at every floor. It would have been a lot easier to make a map or memorize them.”

“I know, right?” Preeti blurts out.

I sigh. This is more difficult than I thought it would be. “So, we have one more day. We’ll do the rest tomorrow. Funny how we’ve walked these corridors for years yet we’ve never acknowledged the details.”

They nod in agreement.

“How did the board work go?” Preeti asks.

“It was fine. You know how the Sakshi group is, though.”

There is still one more day to go for board work to reach its due date.

Till then, I have to complete the board and the Rebels have to complete the second step of our plan.

— — — — —

I’m in the art room, wiping Fevicol off my fingers when the bell rings. It’s the end of the day, but I’m not rushing. I stayed back for the display board prep, and my parents are picking me up like always on stay-back days.

I’m technically a bus student, but the bus doesn’t wait for students marked under “stay-back.” That’s always been the rule.

But something feels...off. The corridor outside is a mess of confused voices. Teachers shouting, students arguing. I grab my bottle and step out, frowning.

The van kids are still inside. The walkers and self students, too. By the time I reach the front gate, the truth unravels like a badly kept secret.

I hear the announcement echo through the corridors like a budget villain monologue: **“Only school bus students are being released. All others must wait.”** Emphasis on ‘must’. Got to love how they sprinkle dictatorship like glitter.

I glance out the art room’s window. The buses are already rolling out, big yellow chariots of “privileged” freedom, leaving behind the ones who dared to take a van or rely on parents. I’m a bus student, sure. But today’s stay back makes me an outcast. They’re not letting van students leave. Not letting parents get their kids. Not unless they switch to school buses.

“They just took our names off the van list!” someone yells.

“My daughter’s been taking the van for three years!” a parent snaps, waving their ID at the gate guards.

“They’re charging double for buses!” another screams.

Inside, some junior kids are crying. They’re barely 8, locked in the library. Others are furious and reckless. That’s all I could see from the locked glass door separating the library and the corridor.

I’m not sure if they’re even under the company of an adult or if they’re just thrown there, left crying while their parents worry outside.

I see Preeti, a self student, pressed up against the window, her mother outside, shouting at a staff member. I wave at her but she doesn't notice.

A girl from class 9 is banging the door, begging them to let her go because she has a sports competition in fifteen minutes. A senior looking boy is requesting the teacher to let him see his younger sister because apparently, she's sick. The teacher keeps ignoring him.

No exits. Not unless the student is on the school bus list. The buses? Gone. Long gone. Probably half-empty. And that's when I realize... it's a setup.

They let the buses leave first. Now they've locked the gates for the rest, forcing them to pay for the bus service.

It's not even nice in the buses... most of the schools have AC ones but our school's buses have no AC, they have broken windows, and are extremely unhygienic. We have to sit with heavy bags on our legs with two more people on one seat.

Basically... a sauna of sweat and dirt.

The only reason I'm not a van student is because my parents think it's safer to be in a bus.

I'm standing near an open window when the first parent storms in. Hair flying. Saree slightly crooked. Eyes glowing with the fury of every PTM she had ever attended. "WHERE. IS. MY. CHILD?" I could hear her well even from far away.

Within minutes, the gates are flooded. Phones are out. Voices are high. A father is filming. A mother is threatening legal action. A man sprints to the side railing, grabs his daughter's hand, and drags her out without looking back.

I glance around.

The security guards? Blocking the gates like bodyguards at a celebrity wedding. Except instead of protecting a celebrity, they're just protecting... the school's shady revenue plans.

The guards try to explain something in that polite-but fake tone they've mastered over years of handling angry moms. But she's already pushed past him, flipping rules like pages in a book she never signed up for. Soon, it's a mob. Bags in one hand, fury in the other.

The guards are helpless, teachers trying to act calm, but you can see the panic. Even the principal peeks out of the office once and slams the door shut again. Iconic behaviour.

One mom yells, "This is a school, not a prison!"

Another goes, "You want me to pay for a school bus for a five minutes distance when I can just pick up my child?"

I could hear another father shouting, "THEY HAVE HELD OUR KIDS HOSTAGE!"

Honestly, valid.

The parents are low key at the verge of suing the principal as they argue with him. And here I am, paint on my shirt, watching the chaos unfold like I bought front-row tickets to the downfall of Regent's Heights.

But this corrupt school never lets any real news leak. Only fake praises.

A teacher spots me, asks why I'm still here. I tell her I had stay back for art. She nods like she cares, then walks off to pretend she's managing something.

Soon, all the students are shifted from the classrooms to the ground where we are made to sit on dirt. The lucky ones get concrete.

Eventually, my parents arrive. My mom has that look... half "are you okay" and half "I'm suing someone."

She grabs my arm. "Come."

And just like that, I walk out of the mess, feeling something like the climax of a rebellion movie.

The guards don't even try to stop us. Smart move.

Behind me, the gates are still rattling with rage and refusal.



Chapter 12

Are we forgetting something?

The Pt.1 exams are going to start after five days.

My friends are still stressed out.

The Rebels, Divya, Shanaya and even Lavina. Manchurian always gets the best grades in her class like I get in my class.

Am I supposed to be studying day and night too?

In these last two days, I have noticed that everyone in my school is tired and burnt out like an overworked domestic animal.

There are dark circles under their eyes from sleep deprivation and a high intake of caffeine which is not good for our age.

I'm surprised at my last thought. Me, a coffee girl, being against caffeine? I feel so weird.

As I get off my bus with Lavina and Shanaya, I realize something.

Lavina and I have been close friends since third grade.

Should I be telling her about my plan for the Students' Strike?

I think that she is trustworthy. I *know* that she is trustworthy.

She also shares all of her secrets with me so, would it be unfair if I don't tell her?

Will she find out or would it stay hidden?

Will she even care or just think of it as a stupid plan?

Should I or Should I not?

Should I Stay or Should I Go by The Clash randomly starts playing in my head.

But,

It would be a risk...

I'll think about it.

Blabbering out without thinking would be a reckless thing to do and... me? *I'm always careful*. I never take unnecessary risks and I also seem to never forget any details.

Shanaya laughs so loudly that she almost loses her balance, "Tavisha, did you hear what she said?!"

"Uh... no," I reply.

"Why are you so zoned out nowadays?" Lavina raises an eyebrow.

"It's nothing." I lie.

"Uh, okay. But if you need help with anything, I'm always here." She smiles.

I nod.

We start climbing the endless-looking stairs, carrying our heavy school bags.

Today, surprisingly, the Sakshi group didn't try to get under my skin as much as they do usually. They even put some effort on the board decoration.

I am starting to wonder if I'm in a dream or if Sakshi is planning to do something behind my back.

But it's neither. They're not acting, they are genuinely working.

Is it some kind of apologizing scheme for Vaishali mam? Or is it because Sakshi is still in that trance?

Or maybe I should just stop being paranoid.

Everything's going to be just fine. I have made yet another excuse to get the Rebels out of here just like I did yesterday.

Today's excuse was that *"Dharvi, Preeti and Mira will look at the other boards for ideas"*.

The Sakshi group and I have almost completed the board work now. Except for adding a few final touches, nothing else is left to do and still fifteen minutes are left before time's up.

I can see that Sakshi is amazed by this fact. She has been on the board work team from the last two years and she knows that the board work takes more than five days

to complete. And under my command, we converted the blank board in a masterpiece in merely two days.

The two skills that helped me in the process were: *procrastination and jugaad.*

My habit to procrastinate has taught me how to complete one hour of work in eight hours and also, eight hours of work in just one hour.

And Jugaad? Well, that runs in my Indian blood.

The Sakshi group and I have now completed the work. We take a moment to look at it and appreciate it.

My favorite feeling takes over me. The feeling of Relief. She hits me like that first glorious stroke of a paintbrush, full of bright yellow paint, hitting a plain, blank canvas.

It takes off one of the many burdens on my shoulders.

It's not the feeling that lasts forever, it's the memory, the experience.

Well, I wish that I could meet my future-self and she would tell me how things went with the plan of the Students' Strike.

"So, we did it. Eh?" It's the first time Vedant has said something to me with a smile in such a long time. For a second, we are back in the old days... before sides were chosen and bridges were burnt.

I don't know what to reply to that so I smile back. "Yeah, we did it".

Though, Sakshi's happiness is quickly drained away, seeing Vedant talking to me in a polite manner.

"Let's go, the bell is about to ring in five minutes," she says in her usual commanding tone while checking her watch.

Sakshi, Simran, Vedant and Yash start to walk when Sakshi's eyes land upon me. "Aren't you going to come to class? The board work is over already."

Always so nosy.

"I have to see where the others are. You can go without me."

They turn away to the empty corridor ahead of them. "Yeah, like we really need *her* permission to do everything," Simran scoffs in her fake, high-pitched voice.

Maybe one day, when she quits being a chicken, she can say that to my face.

Right now, I got to find the Rebels.

After walking for only two minutes, I meet them at the staircase that connects the ground and the first floor. "Please tell me that you covered all the school corridors today...?" I ask hopefully.

By the look on their faces, I'm honestly worried. Dharvi is the first to speak.

"Bro, I have good news and bad news...."

I swallow. "Tell me the good news first."

“We mapped out the entire corridor structure and marked all the spots where the cameras and fire alarms are located.”

“And the bad one is....?”

She sighs. Preeti speaks instead of her. “It will be really hard for us to memorize all the different locations where the fire alarms are out of camera surveillance.”

I let out a short-relieved laugh.

“What?” she asks.

“Nothing... I mean, I didn’t expect you to tell me that *that* was the bad news. You don’t have to memorize anything. I’ve got it all covered,” I comfort them.

“Wait, we don’t have to memorize them?”

“No.” I thought that they would be relieved to hear the ‘no’ but they are looking kind of disappointed.

“Tavisha,” Oh no, Mira has used my *actual name* to talk to me, “you have to tell us the plan, *right now*.” She’s usually pretty chill but she sounds serious.

“I have to, don’t I?”

“Umm-Hmm, you have to do it,” she orders.

They nod their head with agreement. I sigh as I realize the mistake I made. I didn’t tell them about the plan earlier.

I know that the plan was made by me but they had the right to know every detail of it.

They are playing an equal part here and we're more than just a friend group; *we're a team*. So, now I'm going to tell them everything, word-by-word, either in lunchbreak or on phone.

No matter how much time it takes to convert the entire plan in my head, to words, I will explain it.

The fear of my plan being judged or criticized by my best friends has kept me on the side lines of our friendship. And as if they could hear my thoughts, Preeti says-

"Don't worry, we won't judge it. And for the record, your schemes always work." She smiles.

"Yeah, bro, you're a scheming con artist ... Make an exam cheating strategy one day, okay?" Dharvi says jokingly.

The Rebels and the Sakshi group were appreciated by Vaishali mam after CTP, in Maths period.

Sakshi tried to explain how Preeti, Mira and Dharvi didn't do anything but Mrs. Vaishali didn't listen to even a word she said. She's still clearly upset with Sakshi.

Now, it's third period. I ask Preeti to check which class we have.

"It's HPE period," she says remorsefully.

I get irritated. "I don't want to go...Urghhh!"

“We just have to I guess, besides, who knows? Maybe they will actually let us play this time?” She said it like a question.

“It’s doubtful.” I bite my lip.

She sighs.

I remember the times when we got really excited to open our class timetable and see that we have HPE next.

HPE stands for Health Physical Education which is basically going to the school grounds and playing the sport that you’re into.

I used to play basketball. I’m still in that sport but not the way I used to be. The other Rebels are in football. I would have joined the same sport as my best friends if I didn’t love playing basketball so much.

And now, Regent’s Heights has taken that away from me.

The late April heat is almost unbearable in my country.

But, that’s not the issue.

The issue is that the school HPE teachers only take ‘theoretical’ classes now. Instead of teaching us or even letting us play, they just sit in the shade of a tree and tell us stuff.

It’s useless information.

I don’t want to know where they went for vacations or what they ate of dinner, sitting under the burning sun.

Regent's Heights' HPE teachers don't want to get up to watch over us while we're playing. They don't want to climb three sets of stairs to get to our classes, either.

They don't want to do anything and at the same time, they don't even let us have a substitution because they do want their job.

They don't face any consequences, though. No complaints filed. No questions asked. Teachers like Mr. Rajesh make their students survive a sizzling real-life barbecue every single day.

Making at least 5 of us faint or get nauseous and then they have the audacity to pretend like it's our fault.

Eshani and Rehan are the girl and boy class monitors.

"Everybody!" Rehan shouts. "Make a line right now!"

I notice that Eshani does nothing and simply follows Rehan everywhere and he does all the work.

We get in a queue and hope that the hell-like time of our HPE period gets over soon.

As we get there, we go to our respective sports that are basketball, cricket, football, volleyball, tennis, badminton, yoga or judo-karate.

Vedant is in basketball with me. That sucks but doesn't really cause any harm to me because he does not do anything on his own. Sakshi controls him.

There are other class sections too who have to suffer the 45 minutes of torture accompanied by Eighth F.

The first thing I do is ask our basketball coach, Mr. Rajesh, if he's going to let us play today.

"First, we'll sit and discuss some stuff and then, I'll see," he says in his hoarse voice.

I know exactly what he means. No playing today too.

All the students sit on the sizzling hot ground underneath the heat of the bright yellow sun that roars on top of our heads like a fire giant just waiting to devour us.

We're ten minutes in and the seventh grader, sitting beside me, already has his nose bleeding. He doesn't seem to notice. He probably can't differentiate between the blood and the sweat touching his face.

"Hey, your nose is bleeding. Go to the medical room," I tell him.

"Oh." He wipes it with a handkerchief.

He realizes the same and goes to Rajesh sir for permission. "Boy, don't make excuses to get out of here. At least have some respect for the sport you're in."

Well, *you* should have some respect for *your* sport.

"Sir, my nose is bleeding. I am also feeling really dizzy." The boy pleads.

"Don't you dare talk back to me and play a victim card to show everyone that I'm so strict and heartless..." He goes on, telling everyone how he feeds street dogs every day and how much he loves his pet hamster.

He must be treating those animals better than he treats us.

The poor boy has drops of blood stained on his uniform. His white T-shirt is having little specks of red on it.

I don't know what's making me fume. The heat of the concrete basketball court or the dangerous anger burning into my heart. Could be both.

What did we do to deserve this sort of treatment?

Now, if we tell our parents about this, they would just lecture us on how we should be strong enough to face any problem on our own.

And even if they do take any action, the school knows how to cover up anything.

But this isn't just a problem. This is a violation against our human rights.

I understand that the HPE coaches do not want to work for seven hours under the burning temperature. But they should at least put us under a roof during these periods.

Rajesh sir is going on and on about his pet nonsense. He's trying to convey just how kind he is by *telling* it to us. No one starts to give you respect for the things you *say*. It's the actions that count.

I am trying to desperately control my rage. She takes control of me some unfortunate times. If anger could

melt concrete, this ground would've been a puddle by now.

Around thirty minutes are over and I spot a girl, sitting in the football field, right next to our basketball court. She is losing consciousness as her friends help her go to the medical room.

I think I know her. She's Ruhi. I was her table partner in an Art exhibition last year.

I wish I could help these students. I'm also iron deficient and have suffered heat strokes several times in sixth grade. I know how awful it is to pass out at school.

It feels like the whole world has turned up-side down and everyone makes fun of you for not being able to handle these circumstances.

Even the parents and medical room's teacher do the same and tell you to 'be stronger'.

How in the world can I become stronger in this circumstance? Being 'stronger' will not make one's medical condition just simply vanish away. Being stronger will not stop the blackouts or the heat. It's nonsense.

These type of people will make you feel like bearing being oppressed is same as being strong.

I realize... I *am* helping these students with my plan. If Students' Strike works, things will become *much* better around here. I know they will.

— — — — —

We make a queue again and head back to the class.

“I can’t even walk in a straight line.” Dharvi says.

“Are you drunk?” Preeti asks flatly.

Dharvi slightly punches her.

All in all, it was a productive day. The board is completed and we found out a lot of needed information about the fire alarms and the cameras. Though, I’ll have to change my plan and do something absolutely bizarre, unsatisfactory data is still information.

We pass by the principal’s office which is located on the first floor. The air around that room feels like it was imported from Antarctica. Then, we pass by the camera room.

Preeti looks at it and giggles.

“What?” Mira asks.

“Why is there a camera room if the cameras don’t even work?” she says.

Wait a second...

“Hey, you found out about the cameras, right?” I ask the Rebels.

“Yeah?” Dharvi confirms.

“How do we know that the cameras are working or not?” I ask.

“Uh, Trouble, none of the cameras in the school are working. We already know that,” says Mira.

“Yeah... but then... *what is the camera room for?*”



Chapter 13

That Slick Scheme Supreme.

*D*read coils in my stomach as we reach our class.

“It means- it means that...” I can’t find my words.

“There is a camera room. It means that the cameras work.” Mira says instead of me.

“What?!” Preeti and Dharvi shout at the same time.

“But that isn’t a part of our plan, right?” Dharvi asks.

“No, not at all,” I say hastily.

“Oh no, Trouble. What are we going to do?” Preeti asks.

“I’ll have to alter the plan and make amendments.”

They nod. It’s going to take the time that we are short of.

After thinking and thinking and not at all focusing on Maths and Science class; being completely zoned out in lunch break and having scribbled half of a new notebook that I bought for practice work... I have finally come up with a weird, complicated solution.

I tell it to Preeti.

She gasps. "Are you *serious*, serious?"

"Yep." I write it on a paper chit to give it to Dharvi and Mira.

I found a solution. For that, I'll have to become the class monitor and replace Eshani.

-Trouble

I pass it to their seat but the next second...

It's in Mrs. Aabha's hand. She examines the sharpener.

I swallow. My heart skips a beat.

Please don't open it. Please don't open it. Please don't open it. Please don't open it. Please don't open it. Please don't open it.

"What is this, Tavisha?" She asks me in her very high-pitched voice.

"It's- it's a sharpener, mam." I say, trying to sound confident. But I think my face is giving it away.

Preeti, Mira and Dharvi have gone pale.

"Hmm... which seat did you want to pass it to?"

"To the third seat, mam." I point towards Mira and Dharvi's desk.

I think she's about to open it.

"I'm not doing anything in class right now that includes a pencil. Why did you need this?"

I'm thinking of a reply when Preeti says- "Mam, that's a sharpener, not a pencil."

Mrs. Aabha blinks at her. I do too.

I whisper in her ear. "Chica, we need a sharpener to sharpen a pencil."

"Oh," she realizes, "forgot, my bad."

Mira adds in- "Mam, I was trying to mark the important words in my textbook."

Mrs. Aabha is about to say something. Probably asking me to open it. I'm so dead. *We're* so dead. Our plan's so dead.

Dead. Doomed. Over.

But I thank the god when the bell rings...

"The period is over? Already?" She seems confused. "Huh, anyways, I wanted to say that, don't pass stationery in my class again."

That's it?

We look at each other for a second and then quickly say-

"Okay mam, we won't."

That was a really close one. When she goes away, I feel like I can breathe again.

(The next day...)

I'm not liking this.

Eshani and I are neither friends nor foes but still I'll have to remove her from her post of the girl class monitor.

Though, she does nothing but stand in the corner with her arms folded and laughs time to time with her best friend, Nirvi.

Everything is done by Rehan.

But that doesn't mean I shouldn't feel guilty for removing her.

I have to constantly remind myself that I'm doing good to all the students by trying to free them from this education system. But still, a part of me wishes to go back to the time of 6th grade when my school life was way simpler.

Today is a Thursday, which means that we have an assembly in the assembly ground where all the students of 6th, 7th, and 8th gather to do some awkward morning exercises and listen to the boring speech of our school's principal.

But it also brings an opportunity for me this time.

Just a minute after the bell rings and CTP starts, Vaishali mam instructs the class monitors to make us form a disciplined queue. But that's a nearly-impossible task for them because 8th F isn't just *any* class, it's the *rotten class*.

If we had even a tiny bit of unity, our class would have gone successfully against the school ages ago and the Rebels wouldn't even have to do anything but give our support. Nonetheless 8th F's only weakness is the lack of unity.

"Make a queue, 8th F!" Rehan is shouting orders on top of his lungs. That guy really tries his best but no one, especially the boys of our class, listen to him.

Eshani is standing in a corner, talking to Arun and Nirvi. Her hands are folded and she's leaning against the wall.

I make my move. I start pretending to give orders to the class. "Guys, please listen to Rehan. We will be late for the assembly and then our class could be punished by the principal!" No one buys that.

I try again. "I've heard that he'll extend our HPE period!" I yell again. And for the first time, our class actually makes a queue.

A messy line but at least a line.

Rehan is surprised. The Rebels give me a thumbs up.

Now, *how will this help me?* You wonder. Well, one thing that I have noticed about Vaishali mam is that she never misses even a single detail regarding a person's actions.

For quite some time, she's been noticing the attitude that the class monitors have towards the class. Which is expected to be *strict*.

Rehan, whom she's fond of, is fulfilling her expectations completely but, Eshani, on the other hand, isn't.

But, if she wants to remove Eshani, she'll have to have a replacement. That's where I hit the jackpot.

The class has made a queue. And, I persuaded them into doing it.

Rehan tried. Eshani didn't. And Vaishali mam was standing at the door the whole time, while talking to another teacher. But that lady doesn't miss a single thing.

I take a glance at her. She's already looking at me so I look away.

We head to the assembly ground. We're the third class to reach there when we are usually the last ones.

Other classes start gathering. The drummers start to bang their drums. "*Left! Right! Left! ... Left! Right! Left!*" Mrs. Harsha shouts into the mike "On the spot marching may begin now!" Everyone follows lazily.

For god's sake, it's seven forty in the morning!

Mrs. Vaishali approaches *me*, who stands at the very end of the girl's queue because of the height system. I don't like being the tallest girl at all. Eshani is just a little bit shorter than me. She stands in front of me.

"Tavisha and Eshani, I want to have a word." She says and takes us to a corner of the assembly ground while the others start doing awkward on-the-spot jumping.

“Yes, mam?” Eshani asks.

I don’t. I already know the answer.

“Listen, Eshani, I’m sorry but I’ll have to remove you from the post of the girl class monitor of 8th F. Tavisha will continue the job from today onwards.”

That. I was waiting for that.

“But-but, mam. What did I do?” Eshani asks, astonished.

“Nothing,” she replies.

“But then, why are you removing me off the post?”

“Eshani, you did nothing. And, that’s the problem.

Everything was done by Rehan and today, by Tavisha.”

Eshani looks so down hearted, I pity her. But, I guess, it’s for the greater good. Mrs. Vaishali walks away.

The rest of the students are doing jumping jacks while slapping each other by mistakenly. Some are even doing that on purpose. *Mostly the boys of our class and Kritika and Dharvi.*

We wait around a good thirty seconds for that exercise to get over and go back to the girls’ queue once that’s completed.

Eshani eyes me with a slight look of hatred. Guess I have made another enemy.

When the exercises are done, our school's principal comes to the assembly stage to give his long and boring speech in which he promotes school trips and other extra expensive school activities that require an additional fees.

Most of us can't afford all of this. The teachers literally force these trips on us.

Like last year, we all had to go to the local museum with four times the cost of the actual ticket just because they said this would go on the report card as an 'educational' trip.

And like that time when we were forced to sell five tickets of the school's Diwali fair for rupees five-hundred each to our family and friends. The Regents (the student body) had to pay for the stalls and manage the stalls ourselves too.

We were practically doing free labor and still had to get an overpriced ticket to enter our own school's fair that we had organized. And that too was forced... Especially with toppers. We are expected to always be perfect students or else it will put a 'bad impression' on the teachers.

If our principal had the audacity, then he would directly ask for a share in our families' property. He is too moneyminded to be running a school.

"Sir, could you please say a few words to the students of our school?" Mrs. Harsha hands him the mic. Honestly, even if she didn't, he would've found a way to grab it.

He nods. He is in his late 40s but looks older. His blue shirt always looks like it had a fight with an iron. Among the students, he's called 'Doraemon' like the one in the cartoon.

I guess that's because he gives out overpriced trips like Doraemon gave out his gadgets. That's all he ever does.

I wish that someone would waste some of his time so we don't have to listen to his blabbering and *clap* afterwards.

"Good morning, Regents!" he says into the mic.

"Sir, a few words are done!" Someone shouts from amongst the crowd. For a fact, I know that it was Arun... he still looks like a nine-year-old and surely acts as one too. *Could use that to blackmail him later.*

The rest of the students start clapping like the speech is over. Some of them even whistle like they just witnessed ISRO's astronauts going to Neptune.

I have an urge to clap too, I almost do but then, I don't.

Vaishali mam is watching me. Her class's new monitor. Rehan doesn't clap either. Wow, he's a pro.

"Who was that?!" Mrs. Harsha *screams* into the mic again. I feel like Sakshi would grow up to follow her footsteps and be that kind of principal's secretary, just wanting a promotion. A grown up witchy.

"Tell me who said that or else I'll look for that child myself!"
I'm sure that Arun won't even be visible from up there.

Principal's speech is skipped and the applauding doesn't sound fake and forced like it usually does. I wish I could record the look on his face.

The students call him by his nickname so much that now we have all forgotten his actual name. So, the next time someone asks me, 'what's the name of your school's principal?' I'm seriously going to reply 'Doraemon'.

He is like the king of the opposite side of my chess board, who doesn't yet know who he's standing against. Nor he ever will. Hopefully. And just like the piece, he's of no use, but still the most important.

I don't have any personal grudges with that man but I sure do with this system he's running.

The bell rings and assembly's over. They start cheering again for no particular reason.

We enter the class in an utter chaos. It's not the class monitors' duty to form a queue while going *back* to class. So, Rehan and I do nothing but simply walk back.

Mira pulls me aside to a corner with the Rebels. "Did you get it?"

I smirk as an answer.

They laugh, "She got it, guys," says Dharvi as she slaps my shoulder.

"Damn, so easily?" Mira is surprised.

I nod.

“That Slick Scheme Supreme.” Preeti hisses with a laugh.

Being the class monitor means that in exchange for the post, I’ll have to fit in the role of being against the class. Which, totally sucks and I won’t let that happen.

Somehow, I’ll have to be on the good terms of both the teachers and the students if I have to anonymously run my plan without having anyone getting in my way.

But since I was a toddler, I have been accidentally making more enemies than friends.

When I reach the classroom, we start minding the class.

“Hey, go to your seat, Tavisha.” Rehan orders me.

“I’m the new girl class monitor,” I put on a fake grin and shake his hand while he lands a confused glance on Eshani, who looks kind of sad.

“Everyone, settle down! Class! Settle down!” Rehan is once again, screaming, on top of his lungs. It just makes more noise and no one listens to him.

I hate doing this to my classmates but I pull out a whiteboard marker from my pouch. “I’m going to write the names on the board!” I announce *and...*

No one cares... Okay. Second try.

“It’s Mathematics period next!” I add.

And at that, everyone starts to pay attention.

It's Maths period which means that Mrs. Vaishali can show up any minute now. They sit up straight and their chattering is lowered to whispering. Job well done.

It's easy to get my class in control... you just have to know the right tricks.

But then... Arun starts doing his job, which is to stir up chaos as the class clown. I used to like that before becoming the class monitor.

"The new class monitor is on the move, guys! Let's give her a round of applause, shall we?" He says in his loud-childish voice. He isn't faking that one like Simran does.

Everyone starts clapping and it causes a havoc again. All thanks to Arun! I've had enough of these claps for the rest of the day. I should be worried about Mrs. Vaishali coming in any second now but... I'm not.

This problem is an easy one to handle.

I go directly to his seat and whisper in his ear. "I know that you did it." He looks puzzled because he has done many things that he wasn't supposed to do. So, I narrow it down. "I know that it was you who shouted during the principal speech this morning."

He laughs a little, "Everyone here does! But, how are you going to prove that, princess?" Not sure why he called me 'princess' though. I'm more suited for a queen.

I smile. "You see my friends over there?" I point at them.

“Dharvi Garg and Mira Tripathi?” He asks.

“Yeah... they saw every bit of it. They stand just beside you in the assembly, don’t they?”

He nods.

“Well, they aren’t your friends nor they are afraid of you. They are also on good terms with Mrs. Vaishali for helping in the board work. One statement from them, and you’ll be suspended in a blink of an eye.”

He laughs nervously.

I pretend to walk away.

“No, no. Please don’t.” He pleads. Now we’re on track!

I exhale. “Okay, I won’t, but on one condition.”

“Yeah?”

“Shut them up before Vaishali mam comes in.”

He nods again and puts on his usual look of confidence. “Hey! Hey! Hey! Guys!” He calls out to the class. “I think we should make the first day a bit easier for the new monitor, eh? Or else, Mrs. Vaishali could put that weird, nerdy, Nysa on the post instead of her. And we all like her better than *Nasty Nysa*.” He points towards Nysa.

Nysa makes a funny face in attempt to mock him. Everyone seems to listen to the class clown and the whispering starts again.

I kind of feel bad for Nysa but at the same time, she’s the type of girl who irritates the hell out of her classmates.

She was our class monitor last year and didn't even let us *smile*.

She always reminds the teachers of homework submissions and tests and, forms personal grudges with us for not giving our entire lunchbox to her. She doesn't even score that good on tests to possess that much attitude.

She needs to understand that having attitude isn't always bad, but it has limits to it.

While the class is silent, Vaishali mam walks in. *Perfect*.

"Sorry... I'm late, class." She says but then pauses to look at the sight, just to see that class 8th F is quiet.

8th F? And quiet? Both words in the same affirmative sentence? Seems impossible but it isn't.

She smiles at me again, just for a split second that could have been easily missed. She settles down in her seat and directly asks, "Names of defaulters?"

That gets my eyes widened. I'm not doing this.

Nuh-uh.

"Mam, I think it was-" Rehan tries but I cut him off.

"None," I say.

Snitching on students just because they were *talking*? Pathetic. Being free to express our thought verbally is a basic human right. And if the schools think that they can take it away, well, *not on my watch*.

“None?” Mrs. Vaishali is suspicious, “Tavisha, there has to be *someone*. I can’t believe that the entire class was quiet.”

Rehan tries again. “Mam, I heard hooting...”

“No.” I reply again.

Vaishali mam narrows her eyes until they’re a thin line.

“Hmm, if you say so.” She looks a little convinced at least.

— — — — —

It’s third period and Mrs. Anjali is teaching us English grammar. She’s one of the teachers who are serious about teaching.

But I guess she’s a bit too serious. Sometimes, Mrs. Anjali legit gives us death stares for forgetting to bring our notebook or asking to use the restroom before the last five minutes of the period.

Though, considering what other teachers are like... I would say that she’s better than most.

I know that she isn’t going to just let me walk out of the classroom door.

I’m focused wholly on an opportunity that could let me go to the junior teachers’ staffroom which is located right beside the camera room.

She often takes substitutions in junior classes... she sometimes sends the class monitor to the junior teachers’

staffroom to fetch a bottle or a pile of notebooks or something like that. But the odds are thin.

It's a perfect chance.

But I'm still waiting...

There are only ten minutes left for the English period to get over... when, surprisingly, the fire alarm goes off and our school's crazy students starts acting crazy again.

Screaming, shouting, throwing stuff, breaking the rules, *living the best time of our lives*.

It's probably one of the things that I'll miss the most about school after I graduate. *It's the chaos*.

I'm enjoying the craziness when I look at Rehan and recall that *I'm* the class monitor and *I* am responsible to ask everyone to make a queue so that, we could go to the ground.

We all are confused yet, still having fun. Alarms mean no classes and according to the regents, lectures are worse than fires.

But then I notice something strange and it gets me worried.

Mrs. Anjali looked surprised and even went out of the classroom to confirm if it's a drill or not. She came back in a rush and is now trying to help Rehan and me.

I know that for a fact, that this wasn't a fire drill. It's the real deal.

I know this is my chance and I can't simply waste it on some class monitoring stuff.

I grab Preeti.

"What?" She asks.

"Hey, listen carefully. Go to the washroom on the first floor and stay there until I come to get you."

"Okay." Without asking any further questions, she rushes to the washroom.

I ask Mira to do the same. She also does that without any demand for an explanation, knowing that's I'll explain everything later. I ask Dharvi to cover for us when we are noticed missing during the head count after we reach the ground.

These girls are the definitions of best friends.

The alarm is going off like crazy. The sound is really irritating me.

"Mam, Preeti and Mira are missing!" I tell Mrs. Anjali.

"They're not here?"

"No."

"Tell the girl class monitor to go look for them."

"It's me. I'm the class monitor."

"Okay, go see. And be quick, Tavisha."

My real location is located on the opposite direction of where they are actually hiding (i.e. the girl's washroom).

I head towards the camera room.

A lot and lot of students bump into me but I manage to make my way against the disordered crowd and reach my destination on the first floor, next to the principal's office.

The operator is supposed to be some guy named Anmol Dureja, as it says on the sign outside the room. He is responsible for monitoring security camera footage.

I walk around for like 2 mins and make sure that all the students and teachers have evacuated the building.

I know that this isn't a fire drill but I'm on the first floor. In case, there *was* an actual fire, I can just get out of here any time. So can Preeti and Mira because they're hiding in the juniors' washroom on the same floor as me.

I open the camera room's door just a little and take in the view, making sure there was no one. But that part isn't so easy because the room is *huge*.

There are a lot of camera screens too.

Then I guess, lot of the cameras do work. Now, I just have to see which do and which don't.

I skulk in. It's dark in here but just enough light is peeping in from the window.

I'm terrified by the thought of getting caught.

My brain keeps telling me to get out of here and never look back upon the idea.

But, for the record, I'm a girl who listens to my heart.

It's easily noticeable that Mr. Anmol is a messy person. There are wrappers, disposable plates and emptied coffee mugs laying around.

I sigh a little bit too loudly at the sight of the camera surveillance screens. They are working! Damn it!

Though, only the ones in the corridor are working. Not the ones in the classrooms. Sakshi Kapoor always gets away with the mess she makes.

And damn it... I'll have to change the plan for the fifth phase of the Students' Strike again!

After checking all the corridor camera screens and being hopelessly disappointed that they work, I should be heading back.

But I don't.

There is a main panel where Mr. Anmol must sit and supervise all the activities. It is hidden behind a partition. And, all of a sudden, I have obtained the urge to examine it. I mean, it's not every day you break inside the camera room. Right? I have explored the entire room except for that one bit.

But, then, my heart skips a beat as I get closer. *I hear the clicking of the keys of a keyboard.*

It can't be Mr. Anmol. He must be at the ground with the rest of the staff. So, I get closer and closer until I reach the partition wall.

I swallow and close my eyes tightly, already regretting the decision that I haven't even made yet. And turn my head to the left.

I open my eyes.



Chapter 14

The purple one in Ruskin Bond.

The boy gets startled.

I almost scream but control it somehow. If this boy tells anyone that I was snooping around the camera room, I'm so dead.

So, as anyone would do, I make something up quickly.

"Hey! What are you doing here?" I ask in my fake-authoritative-bossy voice.

He recovers unexpectedly fast and asks- "First, tell me, what are *you* doing here, *junior*?"

I clear my throat. "I'm the prefect of class 8th and I'm here to make sure that no one was left behind." I lie.

He leans back in Mr. Anmol's seat and *scoffs*. Huh? I guess he's not so easy to be fooled.

"Listen, you are just trying to trick me, *junior*. And I'm in 10th."

"Don't call me 'junior'. I do have a name," I say blankly.

He reminds me of Simran somehow.

"Okay, I won't...What's your name then?"

My eyes narrow. He got me.

He laughs a bit. "You can't say it, can you now? Because you have broken into the camera room, just like me. I know that you're not a prefect. Probably made some excuse to come here."

"I don't-" I try.

"... 'Don't know what you're talking about?'" He mocks.

I must get out of here before I get caught.

"Listen, I don't know why you're here but, if you don't tell this to anyone, I won't either." I say, keeping my voice as low as a whisper, whereas, he is talking so loudly, I try not to flinch at every word that escapes his mouth.

"Okay, deal. Why are you here?" He asks.

"Why should I tell you?"

"I can ask a teacher if you like."

I clear my throat again. "I wanted to check if we had working cameras in our classroom." Partially true.

"Why?" He asks.

"I beat someone up." I lie again.

"Why, junior?" he asks again.

"You ask too many questions, *old man*."

"Ohhhhhhh, Teacher!" He calls out. His voice rings ten times louder in the empty room. I feel like I just got a mini heart attack. *He's even crazier than my classmates.*

I shush him. “Okay, okay! I’ll tell you! I did it because a classmate of mine stole my lunch.” Another lie.

I’m a professional at them now.

Or perhaps not... because he wheezes with laughter at my words. “You beat the hell out of a poor soul for stealing your lunch?”

I shrug. “I have anger issues.” Except, this one wasn’t a lie.

Well, at least, he looks convinced. “Hmm... You must be relieved then. None of the surveillance cameras in the classrooms are working.”

I nod and ask- “What was your purpose of visit?”

“Why should I tell you?” He says dryly.

“I can ask a teacher if you like, old man.” I repeat his exact words and feel a stab of victory.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Then tell me.”

He frowns. “My best friend got injured and wouldn’t be able to prepare for the exams. I had to steal test papers for him. They are saved in this computer. I’m just sending them to my anonymous email account.”

I don’t know what’s weirder. What he said or the way that he said that so casually. Me, Preeti, Mira and Dharvi are not the only rebels in this school.

“Isn’t that cheating?” I ask.

He looks up from the computer screen, a sudden look of seriousness on his face. “No, the ones who cheated were the school authority. My friend requested them to delay his exams and give him more time to recover and prepare. They didn’t listen.”

My eyebrows shoot up.

“He has really strict parents. If he fails...” he looks down at the keyboard, “...they won’t even look at their own son’s face without shame written all across their expressions.”

Rage and irritation glitters in his eyes.

“Wouldn’t they understand that he was injured?” I ask, suddenly curious about the stranger.

“No. All they care about are the marks on his report card.”

“And I guess he’s the topper of your class?” I ask.

“Me and him both are toppers of our class but he’s always the better one.”

To be honest, I’m surprised. “And you still want to help him? Even though you know that if he’s not in the race, you’d be first?”

“I don’t *want* to help him. I *need* to help him. He’s been my only true friend for nine years. He’s like a brother to me. It would kill me to see him being crushed under this pressure.”

He’s still typing something.

“Aren’t you afraid that your email address might be tracked in the future?”

He grins as if he wasn’t grimacing just a second ago. “It’s an anonymous one. It’s of one of the computers in the Marble Public Library nearby my home. I’ll go there, take pictures from my phone and delete the messages afterwards.”

“So, you were the one who put off the fire alarms?”

“Yes, that was me.”

“And... you came in here to delete the footage of you doing it?”

“Yep.”

“That’s... genius.” I claim honestly.

“I know.” He says, being proud of himself.

“Your friend was okay with all this?”

“No. Not at all. He doesn’t like to cheat. I told him that I’ll help him in preparing for the exams by finding practice worksheets from the internet. Now, I’ll send him the exact exam paper questions jumbled up. He won’t even know the difference.”

It honestly feels fishy how this random boy is revealing everything about his plan. I bet half of it is a lie. Maybe all of it. But I don’t care... the lore’s crazy.

I must go. I suddenly remember. I turn away and start walking towards the door.

“Don’t snitch, Tavisha.” The stranger calls out. He pronounces it wrong but still makes me surprised.

“How do you know my name?” I ask.

He laughs again. “Your I-card.”

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Anonymous_Alex8.” He replies slyly.

“That isn’t your real name.”

He’s not even wearing an I-card so, I can’t pull the same move on him to know his name.

I smile. “Do me a favor and delete the footage of me leaving this room.”

I expect him to say no, but he says- “Okay.” And I leave.

There is so much going on in the school that we know nothing about.

Every child is a story. And today, I opened yet another one I wasn’t supposed to.

On my way, I have to cross the library. Once again, it’s empty.

I quickly sneak in the section with Ruskin Bond’s book... the purple one is still where it doesn’t belong like all the students who wrote in it.

So...

I write in it-

26.

"It's the rebels who make history, The ones who don't win or lose.

It's the rebels who reason with misery, The ones who dare to choose."

I reach the junior girls' washroom and find the girls.

"There you are, Trouble! What took you so long?" Mira asks while Preeti is styling her hair.

"I'll explain everything later. Right now, let's get out of here. Just remember, if anyone asks, you were there because Preeti was not well and stuck in the washroom."

They nod.

We hurry towards the school ground where all the students, teachers and staff are gathered in separate queues. It's a loud, muddled, giant mob of more than four thousands of blue, gray and white uniforms. *Exactly how I imagine the Students' Strike.*

We find our class. Preeti and Mira go to the last of the queue. I bet Dharvi is already there. It's the Rebels' spot.

Mrs. Anjali calls me. "Where were you and those two girls, Tavisha?" She looks genuinely worried.

"Mam, as I told you before, I went looking for them. They were in the washroom. Preeti wasn't feeling well and Mira was helping her." An excuse.

“I should see if she’s okay, then.” She goes looking for Preeti in the queue but I reach there before her. I know well her spot and what she would be doing.

Having fun.

“Chica! You’re sick, okay?”

At first, Preeti is confused but then, she realizes what I mean. “*Obhh*. Okay, okay. I can do this.”

“Preeti! How are you feeling now, child? Better? Do you need medical assistance?”

Preeti starts overacting. Swinging her head from one side to another like a drunk and acting to vomit when nothing’s actually coming out. Reminds me of Indian soap opera actresses.

She might be a drama queen but she’s the best friend no one else is worthy of. Only the Rebels are. Only we can match her level of madness and we’re honestly honoured.

Me, Dharvi and Mira are trying so hard to control our laughter. It’s like we have a ticking time bomb in our stomachs. One wrong move and we’ll burst out laughing.

“I’m feeling better now, mam.” Preeti says in a made-up wavery voice. And then she goes “HUURRRGGGKKHHHHRRRK!” again.

Dharvi whispers in my ear- “Bro sounds like a broken vacuum cleaner.”

“You sure?” Mrs. Anjali asks again. If she doesn’t go away in the next two minutes, I swear we’re going boom.

“Yes, yes!” Mira blurts out. “We’ll take good care of her.”

“Uh, if you say so. But remember to seek my help anytime you need.” She eyes us with suspicion.

Anyone would. We’re covering our mouths so tightly with our hand that it looks like we’re choking ourselves.

I start hand fanning myself and Mira and Dharvi start doing the same. “It’s really hot out here.” I mutter.

“Hm.” She nods and goes away.

We go boom with laughter.

I tell them everything that happened in the camera room afterwards.

Preeti did a good job acting there.

She always jokes around and acts dramatic most of the times but only I know how hard everything gets for her at times.

She had always been a girl that struggled with invisibility. The only moments others saw her were where they made cruel remarks about her.

Girls in this society are reviewed similarly as products are in a market.

One day, I had asked her why she kept laughing at small things like a pen falling to the floor or the chair creaking a bit awkwardly.

She had shrugged, still laughing. “I laugh because if I don’t, I’ll cry. All the time. At everything. And crying’s not my thing. Happy tears are better than sad ones.”

That girl taught me how to laugh.

I put in an account in my tiny notebook-

Third step: Sneaking into the camera room to locate cameras.

Completed with success.

Teachers are seemingly stressed out about the fire alarms. The students have been told that it was just a drill to make up prepared for that kind of real-life situation.

The Rebels know that it isn’t true.

When we reach class, Kiara lifts a huge stack of notebooks from the teachers desk and starts distributing them. The mountain seems to be heavier than her.

I get up and help her.

At the last of the English notebooks pile is the notebook with my name.

I sit down on my desk and open it to see what grade the teacher gave me for its maintenance. An A+ as always.

I turn to keep it in my bag but then, I spot a paper kept in the middle of it.

I think I know what it is.

I take it out.

We have a letter from the I.V group leader.



Chapter 15

Another mission for the Rebels.

Instead of opening our lunchboxes in lunchbreak, we open the off-white envelope.

Dear Rebels,

For your 50th mission, I would be assigning you a classmate of yours.

She sat on Desk 1 during February.

SK is jealous. You know what to do.

Yours sincerely,

Intervention group leader.

The letter is handwritten in neat print-script writing which is always surprising because our education system opposes print script writing. Students are expected to master cursive by the age of 8.

“Fiftieth?” Mira whispers. “That’s kind of... legendary.”

Dharvi fist bumps the air. “We need cake.”

“No, we need answers,” I say, squinting at the note.

The Intervention group leader never actually uses any names for SK's (Sakshi Kapoor's) targets. He/she just puts a riddle there for us to solve. It's easy, usually.

"She is the occupant of the first desk in the month of February."
I read out again. "In February, we have our final exams. During exams, we sit roll no. wise." I pause to think.

"Who sits on the first desk?" Mira asks.

"The roll no. 1. Duh." Dharvi answers.

I get it now- *"Yogita Jain."*

"The quiet one?" Mira confirms.

"Quiet, brilliant, and just got selected for that state-level science quiz Sakshi wanted in on," I add. "And you know Sakshi Kapoor... if she can't have the spotlight, she'll burn the stage down."

"Oh yeah! Let's go." Dharvi's excited.

"I feel like the main lead of an action movie while doing these missions." Preeti shares the exact same vibes as Dharvi.

"If you are the main lead, then what are we?" Dharvi asks.

"The sidekicks, of course." She replies jokingly.

Dharvi hits her with a notebook.

The fifth period comes to a start as the bell rings.

All of the students take off their shoes and go to their respective classes for instruments, dance or vocals. Me and Mira are in instruments. Dharvi is in dance and Preeti's in vocals. But instead of following those rules we all go to the dance room.

"Guys, maybe it's a boy, not the science quiz," Preeti suggests.

"Ritvik from 8th E?" Mira asks.

"Yes, I think he's the one."

Dharvi makes a face of disgust. "Eww, cringe! He looks like someone ran a truck over his face."

"I mean, that's rude," Preeti replies, "but, it is true."

"How can someone *'fall in love'* at such an age. All the boys in our school are lousy rotten chickenshits anyways." Dharvi scoffs.

Preeti laughs at her unique choice of words. "But Ostrich, age is just a number. We can fall in love at any age, for love has no bounds." she says in a tone that can only be described as somewhat poetic.

I say in a teasing voice- "Where did you hear that? In a daily soap drama or in a movie?"

"Oh, shut up," she grins, "I heard it in an anime."

Dharvi adds slyly- "Bro, if age is just a number, can I ride a Lamborghini Urus Performante right now?"

I feel the purpose of us going two hallways in the wrong direction drifting away so I ask- "Let's get back to the topic, shall we?"

"Yeah, okay, bro." Dharvi agrees and then pauses a second to think again. "Where were we?"

"Falling in love," Preeti reminds.

"Eww! Why would you remind me? The whole thing is just two crazy girls being obsessed over a 13-year-old wannabe sigma." Dharvi exclaims.

"The cherry on the top is that they are willing to fight for it." Mira adds, running a hand through her short, messy hair.

"Guys... No," I retort. "This seems so stupid. It's nonsense."

"Right?" Dharvi agrees.

"What I mean is... I don't think these girls would be willing to fight for a boy. Sakshi maybe wicked but she's smarter than that. And Yogita is an intellectual girl."

"Yeah... Only idiots fight over lousy rotten chickenshits." Dharvi agrees again.

"Bro, stop saying that," Mira says to Dharvi, "Besides, what do you think Sakshi's reason for victimizing Yogita is anyways?"

"It's the science quiz, no doubt," I say.

"Agreed." She nods. "We must stop her then."

I wonder how can a girl be so jealous of another girl simply because she got a competition opportunity. But then, I remember who Sakshi is. *The goddess of jealousy.*

No one asks what we are doing among the rush of students going from one place to another.

We wait because Sakshi and her group is nowhere to be seen. But then, we spot Yogita, wearing a uniform that is too oversized for her body. She looks bright with joy written all over her face. We wave a hand to greet her. She strides closer, even more happy to see us.

“Hey.” She smiles.

“Hi, Yoyo.” I call her by her nickname. “What’s with that bright smile today?” I say knowingly.

Yogita bites her lip, shrugging. “Just... excited. I never thought I’d be selected. It’s the biggest quiz of the year. I didn’t get the chance last year so... a bit nervous.”

Before we can answer, we hear footsteps.

Sakshi. Simran. Yash. Vedant trailing behind like usual.

The Rebels hide in a corner, out of sight.

We do so because we know that the Sakshi group is afraid of us and wouldn’t come to confront her right now if she sees us. But then, she would come again with her group when we are not around.

“Hi.” Sakshi says as her group surrounds the girl.

“Umm... hey, Sakshi.” Yogita fixes her glasses with suspicion. “Do you need anything?”

“Yes. I do indeed.” She says like the evil mother-in-law of a daily soap.

“W-what?” Yogita is nervous now.

Simran says, sweet as synthetic syrup- “You got selected, huh?”

Yogita nods. “Um. Yeah. I’m kind of shocked.”

“You must be,” Sakshi replies, voice light but sharp. “Considering... everything.”

“So, what will be today’s plan?” Dharvi whispers.

I sigh because we have used this one before but this is the only plan which can be done without making a scene in the corridor. “*D.L.T.S.*” I say.

Preeti groans. “Not again.”

“It’s clean. Fast. No hallway drama,” Mira reasons. “We’ve got the strike to plan anyway.”

Dharvi nods. “Let’s make this quick then.”

By now Yogita clearly knows what they’re on to but still she hesitates to say anything.

“You know, you really don’t belong in competitions like that,” Sakshi coos. “It’s not your thing.”

Simran snickers. “See, all we’re asking you to do is quit this quiz.”

“But I worked really hard to get it...” Yogita says, keeping her voice low.

“You’d be out by second round, dear. I don’t think Mrs. Shruti would even look at you the same way,” Sakshi grins.

“N-no,” Yogita hesitates.

“Some people don’t know their level,” Yash laughs.

That’s our cue.

I step in- “Oh, like yours? Basement, right?” All five pairs of eyes land on me and the Rebels.

Simran rolls her eyes.

“Keep rolling those eyes, Simran. You might be able to find your brain someday.” I retort. When she gets offended, I add “Just kidding.” I wasn’t.

“Didn’t know the nerd got background dancers.” Yash laughs a bit too exaggeratedly.

I scoff. “Coming from someone who’s biggest achievement is gossiping in the third row behind the teacher’s back.”

“Oh, shut up, okay?” Simran taunts. “You’re just some extra nobodies. No one would care if you’re here or not.”

“Extras?” Mira laughs deadpan. “Babe, we’re the whole plot twist.”

“Urghhh, what do you want anyways?” Yash groans. He looks like a beast who was disrupted while it was having lunch.

“Relax, Yash,” Dharvi says. “We’re just passing by. Totally not here to watch envy unfold in 4K.”

Yogita doesn't respond.

She doesn't have to.

Sakshi indicates her group slightly to ignore us and focus on getting Yogita out of the competition.

"I mean, maybe people who are cut out for it shouldn't have gotten rejected," Simran hisses.

"Oh, sorry... did you mean you?" I ask. "*You* were cut out for it?"

Sakshi raises an eyebrow at Simran.

Simran narrows her eyes. "No need to twist words."

"Okay, good. Cause we're not in yoga class," Preeti says.

Dharvi stifles a laugh.

Sakshi literally pushes Vedant forward.

He looks frustrated so he tries something for the first time- "Tell me something... do you all get paid to be this dramatic?" he says.

No one replies. Vedant clears his throat.

"Yogita, blink twice if you were forced to hang out with them."

Yogita doesn't blink at all. He just stands there awkwardly.

"Did you really open your mouth for the first time just to embarrass yourself?" Mira raises an eyebrow.

Sakshi pulls him back to the place where he belongs. The back of the group.

“Do y’all rehearse this crap or are you just naturally cringe?” Yash crinkles his eyebrows.

“Nah, we don’t rehearse. We just exist... and that’s enough to threaten the hell out of you.” Dharvi retorts.

Yogita finally giggles.

Sakshi glares at the girl. “Wow, Yogita... You should probably keep the excitement lowkey. It’s embarrassing. And remember to pack some tissues for when the pressure hits-” Sakshi wants to say more but we don’t let her.

“Breathe, Sakshi. I can smell the insecurity from here.” I suggest.

Preeti put a hand on her nose. “Eww.”

Yash folds his arms. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“The bad breath or the bullying?” Dharvi chuckles.

Sakshi gasps. “How dare y-”

“Oh, but bullying always concerns us,” Mira cuts off Sakshi.

“It’s like a full-time hobby now.” Preeti smiles.

Sakshi raises an eyebrow. “Who’s bullying? We’re just talking.”

“Right. Just talking,” I echo.

Simran leans in. “We just think... she might not be ready for the kind of pressure this competition brings. That’s not bullying.”

“Yes, it’s sisterly advice,” Simran has those irritating puppy eyes again.

Mira snorts out a laugh. “Yeah, and my cat’s a motivational speaker.”

Dharvi put a defensive hand on Yogita’s shoulder. “Yogita has rights to do whatever she wants. Who are you to make decisions?”

“Seriously!” Yash looks so fed up; I pity him. “How do you guys pop out of nowhere every time Sakshi-”

Tries to bully others? He would have said it if his voice wasn’t caught by Sakshi’s scowl. It’s rather chucklesome.

“Uh... guys?” Yogita tires to hear what we’re talking about... I realize that we’re on a distance.

Sakshi tries to ignore us.

“So, Yogita.” She looks her up and down, trying to find insecurities.

This is what she does. Her way of bullying. She makes others doubt themselves and their abilities. Our job is to stop her before her insults reach an innocent’s heart and break it.

Just like she broke Jiya.

“You know, you really should back out. This game is not your cup of tea!” Sakshi is almost at the verge of screaming now.

“Umm, what do you mean?” Yogita asks.

“Let me explain.” Preeti scoops in.

Simran grits her teeth. “You really don’t need to-”

“Intelligent girls are like queens.” Preeti continues anyways. “We are strong, independent and beautiful. We don’t need stupid people getting in our way like rocks.” *Absolutely slayed.*

“What if they try to humiliate me? You know what they did to Rhea.” Yogita’s eyes glitter.

The Sakshi group looks like they are proud of themselves. Vedant on the other hand, shrinks a little more. If he keeps doing that, soon he’ll be nothing but a Wi-Fi signal in the basement.

“They hovered over her like pigeons until she left the school.” Yogita is fuming at the memory.

Preeti shrugs. “Just say ‘shoo’.”

Me and Dharvi laugh.

Mira giggles, “Yeah, great idea.”

Simran tries to speak too. “No. What she means is-”

“Well said, Preeti!” Mira shouts, perfectly timed.

“No! Shut-” But we don’t give her a chance to say ‘up’ and start clapping.

This is basically D.L.T.S... It stands for **Don't Let Them Speak**.

Simran overdramatically plugs her ears. We know that we're winning when Yogita starts smiling and joins us.

Yogita nods and finally says- "You came here to scare me but I'm not scared of you, Sakshi. And guess what... I've seen scarier things than an overrated girl drowning in her own jealousy."

Me and Dharvi are practically swaying with laughter at this point.

Yash frowns at Sakshi while Vedant is, as usual, fixed behind the group like a statue. Sakshi's eyes widen as she and Simran both shake their heads.

"Let me speak! -"

"Shoo!" Yogita waves her away.

Sakshi narrows her eyes, then flicks her braid and storms off. Simran follows, whispering something that sounds like "losers."

Vedant stays a second longer. Then goes. I don't know whether it was to be sympathetic or just to be in the back of the group again.

Yogita exhales. "I... don't know what just happened."

"You don't need to," Mira says. "You just need to keep walking towards your goal."

She nods. "Thanks. Seriously."

Preeti bumps her arm. “Don’t thank us yet. Go win that thing. Make her rage quit.”

“Yes, I will.” She smiles.

“Let’s go, bro! Or else the dance teacher will kill us.” Dharvi takes Yogita to the dance room.

“Go win, Yoyo.” Mira calls out.

Sakshi could have continued this but since we are standing in the middle of a corridor and our class is about to be started, she doesn’t.

She shoots me a look of horror and goes to the vocals classroom. Her group goes to their respective classes too.

Sakshi is the type of girl that knows perfectly well about what she’s doing and *where*. The whole reason she didn’t create a scene and let Yogita go easily was that she likes maintaining a good image in front of teachers.

Which is fine until it comes to pushing others down to get yourself up.

I wish bullies could make a smoothie of their words and drink them just to see how bitter they taste. But they don’t have to, because, with *D.L.T.S* we take away their ability to communicate with the target.

I look back at the empty hallway.

One more mission. One more saved.

Sakshi Kapoor is like boiling milk- if you don’t watch her, she creates a mess.

And the Rebels? We’re always watching.

I'm not sure if she will try to bully Yogita again... Rest
I leave in the hands of the trusted I.V group leader.

And also, the majestic power of 'shoo'.



Chapter 16

Cat out of the bag yet?

*A*t least, it was a productive day.

Though, we could have done more if it wasn't for the sudden Intervention mission.

Periods like performing arts are the easiest to escape and commit our plan because no one actually knows or cares about the students going from one class to the other.

Especially when the staff sees teachers' pets like Sakshi, class monitors or toppers, they just think that we're going somewhere to help another teacher. No one stops us.

Dharvi's sigh brings me back to the real world. "Today is day number 3 of 7, and it's almost gone."

"Yeah." Mira says as we step on the last stair of the huge staircase and reach the ground floor. "Now, it will take around half an hour for our buses to reach our houses. Then, another hour gone in getting dressed, freshening up and having lunch." She pauses, so I carry on with it.

"One more in doing homework and projects which are utterly useless and don't give us any actual knowledge.

Another hour going to sports academy. Half an hour more having dinner. Around twenty minutes to pack our bag and prepare for next day's school." I include.

"The math ain't mathing." Mira scorns. "Even after breaking our backs to work hard the entire day, we don't get enough time to actually study. That leaves us only with the weekend and that also drains away in ridiculous project works!" I've never seen Mira so annoyed before. She's usually just a chill girl.

"Guys don't forget that our parents would kill us if we stay up late to study." Dharvi adds as we walk towards our buses. "In order to wake up early, we'll have to sleep early. Even if we sleep late to study somehow, we'll have zero energy to go to school the next day and our parents don't let us take a day off as they think school's actually teaching us stuff."

"Exactly." Mira nods. "But another reason to come to school is because of our plan."

"Yes." I agree. I spot Bus No. 28 amongst the maze of buses but keep walking with Dharvi and Mira anyways.

"Bro, I seriously pity Chica for missing her cousin's wedding." Dharvi says sympathetically. "We all know how close they are to each other. She was just as excited as the bride herself. It's a shame that she'll have to miss it."

"No." I say. "She won't miss it. We will succeed and I'm damn sure of that." I claim as they shoot a smile at

me. I always try to shine a light of hope into my friends' hearts by my somewhat 'supportive' words.

I try to look like an optimist in front of the world. '*Always looking at the glass half full*'. Only I know, that deep down, I'm always expecting the worst.

Only I know that our chance of succeeding without getting caught is 0.1%.

No one has ever tried to fix the education system by breaking it... And if they have, then I guess they ended up on a list of forgotten failures.

Today, Mrs. Manisha, my bus in-charge (who also teaches my class Social Science) changed our fixed seats in bus.

Too bad I got there late.

Now, there is no way I could negotiate with her to change it if it's not a good one or in a worse case, if it's not near to Lavina and Shanaya's new seat.

"Excuse me, mam." I say politely. She looks at me brightly. "Where do I have to sit?"

She gets up from her seat and points towards the very back of the bus, at the longest seat where seniors usually sit. "There."

"The last seat?" I ask. I've never sat on the last seat of a school bus before.

“Yes. Just in front of you will be your friends’ seat,” she winks at me.

We need more teachers like her.

“Thank you, mam,” I say and she gives me a nod.

To be honest, I don’t hate Sakshi for keeping up a good impression on teachers. You will never know when it will come handy.

“Hey, Manchurian and Aunty.”

“Hey!” Lavina says.

“Don’t call me Aunty!” Shanaya cries out, jokingly. “By the way... I haven’t talked to you in such a long time.”

“Why were you absent on the first two days of the session?” I ask.

“The wedding season’s going on right now. Lots of weddings to attend. And so, lot of school leaves.”

“We have our first Pt.1 exam on Monday. How are you making time to study?”

Her grin suddenly dims. And I see a gloomy expression on Lavina’s face too.

“I’m not going anymore,” says Shanaya.

I sigh. I knew this would be her answer. We are forced to choose studies to our close relatives’ weddings or special occasions. Everybody knows April and December are the months of weddings in India.

“It’s the same with Preeti.”

“Oh, is she also going to miss a wedding?” Shanaya asks.

“Hm, yes.”

We share our experiences with each other about the new criteria. I guess, the Rebels aren’t the only ones who hate it. Everyone hates it just as much as we do.

Perfect for my plan.

We talk until we get bored and irritated from the same topic. So, I decide to change it. It’s better than awkwardly looking at each other.

“Hey, did your class get any homework from the art teacher?” I ask.

“Not yet.” Lavina shakes her head.

I sigh. “Our class has. It’s due next Monday.”

“On the day of the first exam?” Shanaya asks.

“Yep.”

“Oh, that’s too bad.” She says with a slight frown. “Our class has too gotten unnecessary homework from teachers who hate our section.”

I almost forgot how 8th C has always been second on the list of the worst sections after 8th F.

“Yeah.” Shanaya adds. “Like the one due tomorrow. I still haven’t made it yet. I’ll probably copy from the one my friend, Aanya made.”

“Which project?” I ask.

“The one which Mrs. Vaishali gave on bar graphs and line graphs.” Lavina explains.

“Ohhh... I completely forgot about it! It’s due tomorrow. Our class got it too.” I sigh.

“You are as forgetful as always, Tavisha,” Lavina laughs. “But don’t worry. Here,” she says as she takes out her project folder from her bag. As organized as always, being the topper of 8th C. “Borrow this and copy it. She won’t even notice.” She hands me her project.

I’m grateful for my friends. I wonder if we’ll be the same when we pass out from school after completing 12th grade. Or get expelled because of getting caught trying to hold a strike.

I smile. “Thankyou.”

“Hey,” She tries to show fake annoyance. “That’s what friends are for!”

— — — — —

It feels like paradise when you lay on your bed after a long day at school.

But only until you realize that you must study for your next exam, do all your school homework and still get a scolding from your parents for not being able to help them with household chores.

Wish they could pause for just a moment and see how tired we look these days.

Teenagers are expected to behave like adults when society treats us like children. The most relatable quote I've ever read. It's no wonder why we are always irritated.

Especially for people like me who are the eldest children in their family. We are expected to be the most responsible ones.

I put my thoughts aside along with my emptied lunch plate.

Time to complete my pending homework first. After this, I have a two-hour tuition.

I take all the required material out along with Lavina's project. It would be way easier to copy hers and write it on the blank sheets of my project than to search Google for it.

I owe her one.

I take a moment to admire Lavina's handwriting. It's like her project was printed on a computer. So neat with every letter written perfectly.

It's a shame that teachers don't give a straight A student the credit she deserves and scold her simply because she does not write in cursive.

But Manchurian doesn't care if she gets a C even after doing everything perfectly. Having strict parents, she only cares about her exam results.

Half an hour has been over and so has been half of my project since I started it. I have written everything and now it's time to decorate it. I take out the material from

my school bag and the letter from the I.V group leader falls out accidentally.

I should probably keep it in the hidden drawer with all the other letters that I have received.

I read the letter again... After all, it's the 50th one going to join the collection kept in the drawer.

Dear Rebels,

For your 50th mission, I would be assigning you a classmate of yours.
She sat on Desk 1 during February.

SK is jealous. You know what to do.

Yours sincerely,

Intervention group leader.

I still don't get how this person knows the Rebels. I guess it will always stay a mystery.

I hide it in the drawer.

Damn... My room is a total mess. Having a brother, my room can never stay clean no matter how many times I tidy it up.

But I can't study in filth and clutter so, I get onto the work of cleaning it yet again.

I start by folding a pile of fresh clothes and storing them in my cupboard. Then I tidy up the bedsheet, organize my books and keep my brother's toys in their places.

I realize that one of the ‘toys’ is the yellow and green bracelet that Preeti had made for me at a sleepover last year.

I let out an irritated breath. I’ll never understand the obsession younger siblings have with their elder one’s things.

I open the drawer besides my bed and take out a heavy box named as *‘Memories’*. I’ve probably had it for the past six to seven years.

As I’m putting the bracelet in, I decide to explore the box.

I see a photo strip polaroid picture of the Rebels at the mall, recently... a miniature sized teddy that Jiya had given to me years ago... a picture of the Rebels wearing sunglasses at night... a hand-painted card that the Rebels had made at the end of 7th grade... a picture with me and Mira holding up our Olympiad medals proudly... another picture with me, Jiya and Vedant sharing a massive pizza at my tenth birthday party... a silly little card Vedant had made me on Friendship day, 2019... a picture of the Rebels at our recent sleepover, in head-to-toe blankets... me and Shanaya at the Diwali fair two years ago... a charm keychain that Mira had gifted me last year... a page with tic-tac-toes drawn all over when I had a heated match with Lavina and Shanaya in the bus... a funny pic that my mother had clicked of me and Preeti after we got attacked by lizards on a rainy pool day... a picture of me, my brother and my cousins at the beach when I was eleven...

my old id-cards for the years 2019, 2022 and 2023... annual class photographs for the years 2017, 2018, 2019, 2022 and 2023 a letter Preeti had wrote to me for my twelfth birthday... a picture of me and Dharvi at the hospital when she broke her leg after her football match... a Raksha Bandhan card that my brother had made for me... a picture of me and Jiya wearing matching red dresses when we were nine... a selfie of me and Lavina of when I snuck in a phone secretly to the science fair, last year... a scrapbook with the memories of all the school trips that I've been to.

I realize that I've wasted to much time and get back to the project.

I start by decorating the heading.

BAR GRAPHS AND LINE GRAPHS

Wait a second...

Something catches my eye. This heading looks oddly familiar now than it looked before I got out of my bed.

Not only the heading but the entire project somehow looks different. Familiar.

What in the déjà vu happened?

It doesn't make any sense. What could have possibly changed in the twenty minutes that I was roaming about my room.

I'm ready to convince myself that it's probably tiredness or something but... *my instincts are rarely wrong.*

That's when I realize... *The letter.*



Chapter 17

We all are secrets wearing skin.

The letter.

The handwriting in the letter.

It is exactly same as Lavina's project.

Just to make sure that I'm not going crazy because of the extra workload nowadays, I take out the letter sent by the I.V group leader along with the other letters.

I match the letter 'a'.

It's exactly the same. It's written in the same beautiful print handwriting.

It's either a pure coincidence or...

This. Can't. be.

Oh, but it is.

The Intervention group leader is Lavina.

Lavina is the Intervention group leader.

It was her this whole time.

Whenever I think that I'm smart, something like this happens in my life that makes me feel so naïve.

My bus mate and one of my best friends since second grade is the I.V group leader.

The group leader who somehow managed to get all the information about the Rebels. The leader who knew every single detail about everyone. The leader who left mission letters in my notebooks.

The one who always had been a mystery. The unknown one. But now, I've finally caught you...

Lavina Gupta.

It all makes sense now. *She* has been right under my nose and I never even noticed.

She has always been the teacher's favorite, being the topper of her class. She constantly helps teachers in checking and grading notebooks. She frequently runs errands to the staffroom which would have made it a piece of cake for her to slip letters in our notebooks. Plus, she is trusted and liked by everyone around her.

Both the leader and Lavina shared the exact same personality traits based on what I could interpret from the letters. Both being clever, informative and unbiased.

She obviously gets information from her classmates who are popularly known to be gossip machines. The girls of Eight C know everything about everyone and their information is never wrong.

But what I still don't get is how she knows what the Sakshi group is about to do next.

And the fact that was most obvious was that she has the most beautiful handwriting in all the eight sections. The writing of the Intervention group leader has always left me in awe whenever I received a letter.

Yet it never occurred to me that they both might be the same person.

After thinking for a long time and staring at my abandoned project... I decide this little discovery of mine would actually be of use for the Students' Strike.

Might make our work a lot easier.

Time to have an honest conversation with the leader of the Intervention group.

Day 4th of 7 days and here I am, walking to my bus stop in hope of asking Lavina for help.

Since I'm not alone in this, I group called the Rebels yesterday to seek their advice as well as their approval for what I'm going to do next. I told them about Lavina and the idea of her helping us for our plan. They were as shocked as I am to find out about the truth. Being as supportive as ever, they agreed on doing it.

These days are going away pretty fast. I have no idea how I'm going to pull off the plan without getting caught.

The thought of my friends failing sends shivers down my back. So does the thought of them getting caught. All because they trusted *me* and *my* idea.

I look down at the concrete road I'm walking on. I may look pretty quiet to others this morning but the inside of my mind is screaming... With sleep deprivation, anxiety regarding my friends, fear of getting caught, hope of Lavina accepting my help request and most importantly, the *rage* I feel against this corrupt education system.

I sigh loud enough for my brother to hear.

"What are you sighing at?" He asks with a curious face. I shake my head.

In what words do I tell my 9-years old brother whatever I'm doing... Or at least *trying* to do. Students like my brother, who will sit in the same desks as us, will at least have some pressure lifted off their minds.

If only I succeed.

This strike is not only targeted at Regent's Heights but also all the schools under the corrupt education system of our country.

This is a problem that everyone knows about but no one does anything about it. Not even a word.

An elephant in the room.

The thought of us pulling off the Students' Strike seems phantasmagoric. Big word, right? But it's still too small to describe the unreal feeling I get when I try to imagine my plan succeeding.

A strike is not only a strike, it's a statement. A loud, mobbed and boiling hot statement.

It's a blueprint to justice.

A strike binds together the voices that have yearned to be heard. It's not just the people who are performing the strike... it's also everyone who couldn't.

Some might think that this is too stupid. Too childish. Too bizarre. Too emotional.

But it's these little things what form a child's mind. Only proper education and a safe environment make us a future asset of not only our country but, the world.

Change doesn't occur itself; it takes years of like-minded people who *make* change happen.

The most difficult aspect of change is that someone has to take the first step...

In this case, that 'someone' is *me*.

"Thank you so much for this." I hand Lavina back her project as she smiles.

Lavina is sitting alone today so instead of sitting in my seat behind her, I sat with her.

Shanaya told us that her parents allowed her to skip school today and tomorrow to get some more sleep and extra time to study.

Perfect opportunity to talk. *Real* talk.

I don't know how to break it to her, really. It will seem so weird if I casually bringing up the topic of me knowing her biggest secret. There also a hint of doubt in my head on whether or not she's actually the I.V group leader or it's just some unusual coincidence.

She will think that I'm a maniac to accuse her in such a way.

But then, if she really is the leader (which she most probably is), I need her help. Her help in my plan may extend its chances of succeeding from 0.1% to 0.2%.

"I'm bored." Lavina's sleepy voice cuts through my thoughts.

Perfect. I could start a conversation.

"Let's talk about something, Manchurian." I say with a smile.

"Hmm... like what?" She thinks as she glances lazily at the bus window.

"Maybe... about secrets?" I smirk.

There is a hint of suspicion on her face which goes away so quick, I'm convinced that I imagined it.

"Secrets?" She's interested in the topic now and sits up straight. "You wanna know the latest hot gossip?"

"Uh no, I'm asking about-"

She cuts me off with a sly smile on her face. Her iconic one. "I know absolutely everything about everyone in the school."

But the next words I say slip out of my mouth impatiently before I can catch them. “Is that why you know when someone is getting targeted by bullies like Sakshi?”

Lavina freezes at my words. Only for a moment, though.

“Tavisha, what are you talking about?” She giggles. “Well, I do know names of bullies and-”

My turn to cut her off with a sly smile. “Drop the act, Manchurian... Or should I say... *the Intervention group leader?*”

“I-I still don’t-” She tries but I continue speaking again.

“Oh, Lavina, it’s okay. You can trust me.” She blinks at me with a blank expression. My voice drops to a whisper, trying not to be exposed to eavesdropping. “See, I know who you are. I understand and admire what you do. And, it’s okay if you hid it from me. After all, we all have something to hide, don’t we?”

At first her expression is a mixture of surprise and confusion. But then, she sighs, putting on a blank face once again, like a mask.

She shakes her head, as if trying to shake off a thought that perhaps I’ll never know about. “How did you know?”

She says it so plainly. I honestly expected her to defend herself, deny the fact and give in after a longer time of argument.

I'm relieved that I wasn't imaging everything and just accusing one of my best friends for being someone she isn't.

I'm about to answer her when the bus goes under a canopy of trees. I always find them beautiful to look at. But this also means that we have almost reached school.

Damn, I should have started my conversation with her sooner.

She seems to realize it too.

"Tavisha?" She blinks at me, expecting an answer.

"Long story, I'll explain later."

At the end of the canopy is the road that connects to my school. The bus enters through its larger gates and stops in the assembly ground. Everyone starts picking up their bags to get out.

I can feel the tension between us, I'm sure she does too. A lot on our minds and only a little time to talk so... I say what I need to say the most.

"I need your help."

— — — — —

I go to the last seat of the second row where my bag is kept. I have to sit with Arun. In front of me is Vedant. Sitting beside him is another boy called Karan who dislikes me for some unknown reason.

When we asked the teachers that, “Why do we have to sit in this arrangement a few days before the exams even started?”

They had replied, “It’s for practice”.

I’ve barely uttered a word after getting off the school bus today. Everyone is strangely quiet. Tiredness and sleep deprivation have seemingly taken over us.

Another day to be prepared for boring classes where the teachers sit back and teach us nothing and in the last 10 minutes, they pour down gallons of homework on us.

Like always, Mrs. Aabha will give us something out of syllabus with of course, a deadline. She does this on purpose every time.

The hatred for corruption burns in my heart. I don’t get why justice is not simply provided and it is rather purchasable.

Even in organizations involved in things that are fragile such as a child’s upbringing. The educational system has been dissolute from the very moment it even became a thing.

The problem with the new criteria is not that they are taking the exams before the summer holidays... The problem is that they are not teaching us at all.

The teachers are only pretending to teach us. They have already given up on completing their subject’s syllabuses, even when they have only one subject to teach and the students have six main subjects to learn for the

exams along with several side-subjects which are necessary for grades.

Parents work day and night to earn enough to afford their child's proper education, only to buy excessive homework and peer pressure for their children along with the lack of creativity and originality. A perfect cage.

Even if I change my school, nothing will change. Almost all the schools in my country are the same. Running under corrupt systems and people who value their greed more than their actual profession.

Things in our county will only change when teachers start to see their job as gardeners and the students as saplings. Only then, we will grow into independent and self-sufficient adults for the progress of our nation.

The methods of teaching should also be graded, monitored and judged just like children are.

Society only sees a failure in children who lack a certain type of stereotypical academic intelligence, and they completely ignore the reason for the lack of it.

My parents along with some other parents who trust their child enough to believe the struggles, protested against this and came to the school reception even. But there is nothing you can do when you have no proof.

And that is why, I take my small notebook out and write an entry in it.

Fourth step: Gathering proof.



Chapter 18

On pins and needles.

*R*egent's Heights is oddly silent today.

Every student overworked. Overwhelmed.
Pressurized.

And everyone's unbothered about it.

The worst thing is, we can't even talk about it to our elders whether they are teachers or parents. Whenever we admit being stressed the most common answer we get is 'you're not going to handle it when you grow up if you can't even handle it right now.'

Stress and strain don't arise looking at our age, they come looking at our environment and situation.

The quiver of the upcoming exams and peer pressure has put us all on pins and needles.

Today, the last period was H.P.E.

For once, they didn't make us sit under direct sun.

Today, they let us actually play since surprisingly, most of the students had completed their notebooks and the

rest of them had made brilliant excuses that led to us finally playing.

But that too didn't make everything fine.

Since most of the time they punish us and rest themselves, students hardly got any practice in their respective sports. Some of us like me, go to sports academies. But the ones who don't, don't even know how to play.

The sports teachers didn't even pay attention to the game.

Most of the parents are sitting in their homes in delusion that their child would be learning a sport along with studies in the high reputation private school that they're paying for...

But alas.

We have no proof.

Yet.

There is a *lot* I must do tomorrow when I come to school. Gathering proof might seem like a small step but it is the most important one in the plan.

The fourth phase. The second last phase. The riskiest one.

I sigh.

Some nights I wonder if I'm a hypocrite. The school praises me, holds me as a proof of success. They use the words like '*the cream*' or '*the gold*' for toppers.

And here am I, plotting its downfall in secret.

What if no one listens?

What if no one care?

What if I'm exposed?

They'll take away everything I've worked for and still nothing will *change*.

Maybe I'm fooling myself, thinking that one eighth grader girl like me can shake a system that was built on decades of exploitation. The same girl who couldn't even muster up the courage to look people like *Sakshi* in the eye until last year. *The same girl who couldn't even defend her prior best friend.*

Maybe I'm just another name on their honor roll, too scared to admit that I don't belong there.

I've always been torn between the thrill of rebellion and the superiority of leadership.

But what I know for sure is that once you step in the trouble-making sector, there's no going back.

I have to do this.

"And that's how I figured out," I tell Lavina what all happened that led me to this conclusion.

Lavina sighs and puts her hands in the air. "Okay, I accept my defeat, miss detective." She laughs lightly but then puts on a skeptic look. "Tavisha, I can trust you but

are there others who know about this? It can get messy for me if this reaches the higher authorities.”

“Hmm, yeah. The Rebels do.”

She sighs again. “Can I trust them?”

“You already had trusted us before, Manchurian. We won’t let you down” I say with a confident smile. “Besides, bullies like Sakshi and her friends deserve to be opposed by a group of people who do what teachers and parents often ignore because they find it too childish.”

“Yeah, I wish they knew the emotional insecurities bullying creates.” She sadly shakes her head.

“How did you even pull this off? I never figured out how exactly this group works.” I ask.

She shrugs. “We’re not just a group of students. We’re a network. Every section has someone who listens, observes, and reports. It’s not about spying... it’s about protecting. When someone is in distress, we step in. Quietly, but efficiently.”

I smile at that. “Preeti would describe you as *a real-life superhero*.”

She laughs. “I guess I did read many stories and watched movies about fairy godmothers with wands and flying men in capes, coming to save every broken child with their magic.” She takes out a little snack box from her bag. “But as I grew up, I realized that one doesn’t need ‘magic’ to be someone’s guardian... Want one?” She hands over the box of biscuits to me.

I take one. "Thanks."

The afternoon sun is beating down on us even when we're sitting inside the bus, under its roof. Lavina wipes off beads of sweat from her face with a handkerchief.

"How do you know what Sakshi is going to do next?" I ask Lavina.

She hesitates to reply. Then casually ignores my question.

I continue anyways. I need answers. "How do you know that your team won't betray you?"

She finally replies. "I have separated the intervention group into two parts- The Sight and The Voice... The Rebels are a part of The Voice. The Voice are responsible for directly protecting the students. Someone has to do it since the school doesn't take it seriously."

I nod. "I get that... but what does *The Sight* do?"

She looks out the window again. "The Sight observes. They observe everything. And unlike The Voice, they can contact me directly."

"They know who you are?"

"Most of them do. They keep an eye on the bullies... and also The Voice. I can't risk this group being leaked."

"That's clever." I pause to think. "How do you know what *Sakshi* is going to do next?" I ask Lavina once more. "Who do you have in charge of that?"

Lavina takes a sharp breath. “See... Tavisha, I can tell this to you but you have to promise not to tell anyone. Please.” She’s dead serious.

“Not even the Rebels?”

“No.”

I sigh. This is hard but- “Okay.”

Lavina exhales. “He came up to me and asked me to form this whole group. There are fifteen members including the Rebels and himself. He gave me the idea.”

“*He*, who?” I ask a little impatiently.

Lavina looks at me with sharp eyes. “Vedant.”

My mouth is left open from surprise. Lavina closes it.

“So, yeah. *He* tells me everything. He’s a part of The Sight.”

I finally find words. “That stupid idiot! He didn’t have to break our trio and make Jiya leave school in order to just join Sakshi! He could have told me and Jiya. We would have understood!”

“Tavisha, calm down. He didn’t come up to me *before* he joined Sakshi. He came *after* he realized what a wrong decision he had made.”

“If he apologized, I would have forgiven him.” I shake my head.

“I guess, he did... silently.”

I’m still not going to forgive him.

“What did you need my help with, Tavisha?” She asks.

I forgot about that...

I tell her everything about my plan for the Students’ Strike.

Especially the final step. The fifth phase. The phase where I need her help the most.

Now *her* jaw is left hanging in the air. I close it.

“Damn, girl... And here I was, thinking that I’m the most tainted. How do you look so innocent?” She laughs.

“Uh, what can I say, I have a god-gifted innocent face.” I say coolly.

4 days gone out of 7... 3 more to go until the strike.

Two more phases to complete for the plan.

The most difficult one awaits me.

Only 0.2% chance of success.

— — — — —

As soon as I reach home, I take out a pen.

The pen in my hand is sleek black with a hidden camera. It’s next to impossible to notice the little thing. Though, the quality is not very good but it still shows us exactly what we record. And most importantly, *what we hear.*

This little piece of object was my only hope to pursue the idea of the strike in the first place. Without it, phase four is ash. Without phase four, the whole plan is nothing.

I am supposed to sneak this pen on Friday to school.

I charge it for a few hours while I study.

Its charged.

I test it.

It's perfect.



Chapter 19

The fourth phase.

Mrs. Vaishali is late to CTP or perhaps absent, we're not sure. The Rebels gather in the farthest corner of our classroom. While everyone is hehe-haha-ing, we're busy *planning*.

Mira sighs. "This will be risky."

I nod. "We'll have to make sure to not mistakenly leave any evidence, recording the footage."

"Which is next to impossible!" Dharvi exclaims, while still keeping her voice low.

"No, it's not, *pessimist*." Preeti mocks.

"How so?" Dharvi asks, annoyed.

"Everything is fair in love and war. Everything is also *possible* in love and war." She says slyly.

Dharvi rolls her eyes.

I interrupt. "This is neither love nor war, Chica. This is a strike. An anonymous one. And we will only succeed if you *focus*."

Mira narrows her eyes at Preeti and Dharvi.

“Aye-aye, Captain!” Dharvi salutes jokingly. Preeti does the same. It’s hard to be serious when I’m with the Rebels. Mira smiles.

“So, I guess we should take turns to record?” I ask.

Preeti shakes her head. “Too risky, darling.”

Mira replies. “Yeah, we should probably hand it over to someone who takes errands around the school premises more often.”

“And also someone who can record from multiple angles.” Dharvi adds.

I sigh. I already know where this is going.

Preeti adds- “And someone who has the permission to roam around in the class because she is the class monitor.”

Mira elaborates- “Thus, they won’t figure out who shot the footage by looking at the angle of the camera and interpreting the position of the person sitting in the classroom on this specific date.” She says it all in one breathe.

I narrow my eyes at them. “Me.”

The three nod.

“You can do it, right?” Mira raises an eyebrow, though, she already knows the answer.

“Of course, I can.” I give them a reassuring nod.

“By the way,” Dharvi says, “wouldn’t we be giving away an essential clue that might lead them to us?”

“Which clue?” Preeti asks.

“Our class,” Dharvi replies, “even if we shoot from different angles, anyone would easily figure out that this is our section.”

“Yes,” I say, “but, Ostrich, there are 44 students in our class. They can’t possibly figure out who shot the footage if we do it from multiple angles.”

“Also, we have you, a pro editor,” Preeti says.

Dharvi smirks at the compliment. “Can’t disagree.”

“But I suppose it really is risky,” Mira sighs.

I turn on the pen recorder and tuck it in my shirt pocket. “To do something new is to take risks.”

Today was the exam motivation school assembly.

The Rebels had volunteered to help in the backstage. Instead of helping, me and Preeti made an excuse and slipped out of the scene while Dharvi and Mira cover for us.

We were just testing phase four when we actually found something.

A staffroom door was slightly ajar. I could see Mrs. Harsha, Mrs. Shalini and Mrs. Manisha.

Inside, the tension was so thick, it could slice paper.

“I’ve stayed quiet for too long, Harsha,” Mrs. Shalini said, her voice low but shaking with fury. “But passing the

Minister's son with forged marksheets? That's beyond incompetence. That's criminal."

Preeti's hands tightened around her notebook.

"You think I care about your little moral compass?" Harsha shot back. "Do you know how much pressure we're under from the top? You think we have a choice?"

"You didn't just obey," Mrs. Manisha said. "You took money. You *let* them do it."

"He failed almost every paper," Shalini hissed. "You and I both know that. And you printed a passing certificate. You think we'll stay silent?"

"I know you will," Harsha said, crossing her arms. "Because if you speak up, you'll be labeled jealous, bitter, unprofessional. And who will believe two disgruntled teachers over the minister's connections?"

There was a beat of silence. Shalini mam spoke, slow and razorsharp. "We're not scared of you anymore, Harsha."

"Then go ahead," Harsha mam sneered. "Ruin your own careers. Try. Let's see who listens. You'll be teaching tuition in someone's garage by the end of the month."

"You're poisoning this school," Mrs. Manisha said quietly. "And if no one believes us, maybe they'll believe an evidence."

That shut Mrs. Harsha up.

We had it all.

Mrs. Harsha's smirk faltered for a second. Only a second. "You have nothing," she said, regaining her fake calm. "And even if you did, this system protects people like me. Not people like *you*." She said the last word like the teacher in front of her was something stuck in her shoe.

Preeti nudged me- just a small tap- but I knew what it meant.

Not this time, we both thought.

The recording was clear. The words unmistakable.

The truth had finally spoken.

Harsha mam laughed bitterly, "You want to play saviors now? You really think self-righteous speeches will fix everything?"

"No," Shalini mam said, quietly, but loud enough for the camera. "But someone has to start. We own these kids more than just hollow classes and finish-the-syllabus drills. They're students, not checkboxes."

Silence. Sharp and heavy silence. I'm feeling it settle into my bones.

Then- "You know what? Mrs. Harsha's voice snapped like dry twigs. "You both want to protest? Fine. But not on my watch."

"What?" Mrs. Manisha's voice tightened.

"I mean, you're dismissed. Effective immediately. I'll inform the principal myself."

“You’re *firing* us?” Shalini mam demanded. “For standing up for actual teaching?”

“No.” Mrs. Harsha said. “I’m firing you for thinking you are better than everyone else and disrupting the team’s harmony.”

Preeti’s nails pressed into my sleeve. I glanced at her, saw her eyes full of disbelief and rage.

We didn’t breathe; we didn’t speak.

We just captured it.

Mrs. Harsha thinks that they don’t have any proof, except now, we do. She thinks we can’t do anything? Except now, *we can*.

Chairs scraped. Mrs. Harsha stormed out of the staffroom, her heels clicking with finality.

I looked at Preeti. “I think we just got our clearest evidence in first try.”

She nodded. “That...was gold.”

“No,” I said, voice low. “That was *proof*.”

We tell everything to the rest of our group.

— — — — —

Today, instead of wearing the H.P.E uniform that I’m supposed to be wearing on Fridays, I wore my regular blue and gray uniform in order to keep my pen in my shirt’s pocket.

And that is why Mrs. Aabha says in her usual shrieking voice- “Why did you wear the regular uniform when everyone in your class is wearing an H.P.E uniform?”

“I forgot it was Friday.” I shrug.

“Do you forget to eat and sleep too?” Classic dialogue, that one.

“No, mam.” I keep my replies as dry as possible.

“Then why did you forget to wear proper uniform?!” She makes a funny face unintentionally.

I could almost laugh right now but I manage a straight face.

“It won’t happen again, mam.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, whatever. *Undisciplined fellow.*” She practically hisses.

When she looks away, I finally break the serious fake face and look at the Rebels. They are laughing too.

Undisciplined fellow? Mira mouths the words as she giggles.

She goes to scold another student.

She is not yet aware that the time she is spending of our class just scolding and giving homework to students instead of teaching, is all being recorded.

They think they can fool us easily because we are children. They think they can fool our parents and get paid without doing anything. They think they can run this corrupt system and make a fool of everyone.

But no... no one's a fool. Everyone knows that this system is unjust and greedy. But the only foolish thing that the citizens do is to ignore the entire existence of it.

That is what I'm trying to do. Trying to open the eyes of the people.

We just came back from H.P.E... everyone's faces have gotten hot and red from the extreme heat. We're looking like tomatoes.

All expect Dharvi, who is as always, as pale as snow.

In any other friend group, she would have been called 'snow white' but the Rebels call her 'dead body'...

And she loves it.

The Rebels have once again gathered in a corner of the classroom.

Since Mrs. Vaishali is absent, the class is waiting for a substitution teacher. Well, not exactly *waiting*. More like, hoping she doesn't arrive and no one notices that our class is unattended at the moment.

Rehan is at the monitor's duty, constantly shouting and yelling at students to stop making a commotion, but the chaotic students of Eighth F are still unbothered and wild.

"What did you tell Rehan?" Mira smirks.

I smirk back. "I told him that Chica got hurt in H.P.E and as the class monitor, I have to attend her."

“Hey!” Preeti pouts, “why do I always get *sick or hurt* in your excuses?”

“It’s because you’re a drama queen, bro.” Dharvi says nonchalantly as she fixes her pixie hair.

Preeti’s pout gets poutier.

I clear my throat. “It’s because you can act better than us, Preeti.”

“The excuse was so lame,” Dharvi laughs. “He could have just told you to go to the medical room with Chica.”

“Well, the medical room is of no use, to be honest.” Preeti says.

“True!” I exclaim, “Remember the time in 6th grade, I tripped over on the uneven assembly ground while going to my van?” I ask. They nod.

Mira adds- “Yeah, I remember... You were a van student at that time.”

I nod and continue- “I hit my forehead, and it started to bleed. The right side of my face got badly scratched. It was so bad that I looked almost unrecognisable. And... instead of wiping my wound or giving me first aid, the medical room’s teacher gave me a *Hajmola*!” I scoff.

“What the hell?” Dharvi is shocked. “Isn’t that a digestive tablet?”

“Yes, it is.”

Mira blinks and shakes her head. “Let me get this straight... you tripped over the uneven ground in the

school premises, which is the school's fault in maintenance and they didn't even provide first aid?"

"They didn't." I shake my head.

"First aid should be free but it is still included in out fees and still... they didn't provide you anything." Mira sighs.

"Every other day, someone or the other trips on that uneven ground. The school doesn't bat an eye. But I had no idea that they don't even provide first aid!" Dharvi is shocked too.

I blink in realization. "You didn't know this all?"

They shake their heads.

"I guess, my point's proved then... We have to reach out to the people and show them what all is happening inside a school's walls," I say.

"Yes!" Preeti exclaims.

"Trouble." Dharvi's petite but strong hand lands on my shoulder like a stone.

"Yeah?"

"Have you recorded all the major issues by now?"

"Well," I practically sing the word, "till now I have recorded several things that could be potentially used in the final footage. Alongside the things Mrs. Harsha said."

"No doubt, but... Do you think that's enough to-" She pauses to find the right words, "...do what we want to do?"

“No, it’s not.” I sigh.

“So,” Mira asks- “what now?”

I smirk. “To do a greater right, do a little wrong.”

“I think I’ve heard that somewhere.” Preeti wonders out loud.

“Shakespeare.” I reply.

“So,” Dharvi raises an eyebrow, “what’s the plan?”

“Easy,” I shrug “To record, we bunk.”

The Rebels ended up lying to Rehan about taking Preeti to medical room. The substitution teacher hasn’t yet shown up.

“No, you can’t take Preeti to the medical room.” He says in his usual controlling voice as if he was talking to his servant.

No *boy* can control me. Whenever I talk to him, I have a sudden urge to punch him in the face.

“You know the rules, only the girls’ monitor can take a girl to the medical room,” he adds.

“Well,” Mira says in a tone that’s even more commanding. “The girls’ monitor has to go look for the substitution teacher.”

Rehan raises his voice higher, “The boys’ monitor can also do that. I’ll go look for her.”

“Who will look after the class then?” She says and that leaves Rehan thinking.

The Rebels are unsurprised by how perfectly Mira can argue with anyone. We know her too well.

Rehan sighs, “Go, look for her, but be quick.”

Mira smirks and slip out of the classroom. Dharvi does the same.

“Hey! Wait! Only one of you will go.”

Mira shrugs “It would be easier to look in different directions if we split up.”

She leaves with Dharvi, without even bothering to get a reply from Rehan. He rolls his eyes.

“You,” he points towards me, “go take Preeti to the medical room.”

“I know.” I snap as I walk past him with Preeti by my side.

We are not sure if it will work or if we’ll be expelled but we head towards the senior teacher’s staffroom anyways.

I nudge Preeti and whisper- “Remember, we’re not just spying. We’re documenting corruption in its natural habit.

She smirks. “Natural Geographic: Broken Education System Edition.”

We try to keep a straight face in hallways.

We searched the last two staffrooms and found nothing. I doubt if we should continue as we're short on time. But being a reader, one thing I've learnt from books is to never give up.

So that's what we do.

Preeti had gone in the staffroom to 'find her missing notebook'. She's acting pretty well. She actually went in there to signal Dharvi, standing at just vertical of her to signal me and Mira to get out of there if one of the teachers decides to get out of the staffroom.

It's not that hot outside the staffroom because of good airconditioning (which the students are paying for, for their own classroom and not getting any) but still, we are getting sweaty with anxiety.

Preeti, just as I told her to, starts searching the area where the closed window is and secretly slides a little bit of it from the bottom.

I slide the pen in the space. Preeti nods in approval of the camera angle and Dharvi nods at us.

Perfect.

We have 8 minutes by the clock, until the bell rings. It's good that we brought a notebook with us.

Whenever someone sees a student wearing a class monitor batch, with a notebook, in front of the staffroom, doing something, they don't suspect a thing.

The people controlling our corrupt education system have misused their power for ages. It's about time I misuse mine too... but, for the good of the students instead.

Dharvi, goes inside and pretends to look at the substitution chart. She comes out shortly after.

"There's nothing going on in there... though, I found out that next period is a substitution too." She whispers.

Mira turns to me. "You sure you want to record this Trouble? We're short on time."

"Switch places with me." I tell Dharvi.

Now I have a better view of the staffroom.

Mrs. Aabha is already there along with Mrs. Poonam, who doesn't teach our class. Another teacher, whom I don't know is marking some papers.

Mrs. Aabha tilts her head up from her cup of tea and I quickly turn away before being caught.

"Hey, girl... what are you looking for?" She asks Preeti.

"My notebook. It went missing while checking."

"My subject?"

"Yes, mam."

"Hmm... Okay. But be quick. It's not my fault that you can't take care of your notebooks."

I turn to Mira to drop the plan and go somewhere else when the other teacher yawns and says- “I swear, these kids are getting more and more entitled by the day. Always complaining.”

“Tell me about it, Neeta,” Mrs. Poonam scoffs, “One of my students ask me why aren’t we teaching anymore. Imagine that! As if we have the time and energy.”

A new voice joins the conversation. I turn to realize that the surprisingly normal voice is coming from Mrs. Aabha’s mouth. “Yeah, like ‘Mam, I don’t understand this chapter’ Well, sweetie... Figure it out.” She mocks as she sips on her tea.

“And you know what the syllabus looks like?” Poonam mam says, “It’s a mess. A huge burden with a due date.”

Mrs. Aabha sighs, in somewhat relief. “If they fail, it’s on them. *We’re* still here next month, collecting the paycheck. That’s the system.”

“The whole system’s a joke. You think I really care if a child understands algebra or not? Please.” Mrs. Poonam laughs.

Mrs. Neeta throws down a pile of paintings on the desk and talks to Mrs. Aabha and Poonam while blindly putting tick marks on them. I wonder how the children who made them with such hard work would have felt if they saw their work being treated like this.

She says- “I try to make them read the chapter and teach each other as a classroom activity. Call it ‘flipped learning’. Sounds fancy enough for the parents.”

After a pause, Mrs. Poonam whines- “They keep asking questions like I’m Google. I didn’t sign up for this level of curiosity.”

“Ahh, a tragedy, truly. Curious children in a school! The horror!” Mrs. Aabha laughs in a dramatic voice.

The Rebels exchange looks, knowing that we had hit the jackpot. I silently mouth to Mira- “Did you get that?” She nods only once with eyes so sharp; they could pierce what they land on.

The bell rings.

Poonam mam stands up and stretches.

Mrs. Aabha jokes, “Don’t forget your coffee. You’ll need this to survive the over enthusiastic failures.”

They laugh. We fume.

Preeti signals us to get out of there. We get merged in the crowd of students and teachers going from one place to the other. Preeti slips out of the staffroom and joins us.

We secretly do a high five. That was smooth.

We search another staffrooms after knowing that the next period is a substitution too. Mira and Dharvi’s excuse timeline had ended; it’s just me and Preeti now.

I tapped the camera pen twice. It blinked once, recording.

Slipping it into my shirt pocket, lens peeking out just enough, I strolled past the staffroom, heart thumping like it had a secret to tell. The corridor smelled like sanitizer.

We have searched many rooms by now. Nothing.

Five minutes later, Preeti knocks on one staffroom door, asking for her “lost math notebook.” I slipped in behind the open door and placed the pen on the staff table near a rusting pen stand.

Then we waited.

Miss Mahima dropped her tote and groaned, “Another day, another migraine. I can’t teach three huge chapters in just three days.”

Mr. Nikhil flips through some pages as he adds- “I just gave them to read it as homework. The weak ones would fail anyways as they always do.”

Mrs. Anjali was checking notebooks silently in a corner when she looks up and says- “Uh... sorry, but don’t you think that’s wrong? We should teach these students honesty and give them less homework to make space for PT.1 preparation.”

Mr. Nikhil yawns. “What do you mean, Anjali mam?”

“Nikhil sir, I mean that we are the ones who are responsible for the future of these children. School should be like their second home. A place of learning safely.”

The other teacher laughs- “Anjali mam, I’m sorry but this isn’t Hogwarts.”

Mrs. Anjali leaves the staffroom, disappointed.

Miss Mahima leaned in, whispering, “We’re basically babysitters now and still she thinks that we’re the villains here.”

Mr. Joshi, half-asleep in a chair, muttered, “Forget it...”

Snorts. Another sip of chai.

Then came the cherry on top.

Miss Mahima, again. “You know, the minister’s son failed. Guess who magically got 28 marks extra? I was told to consider it ‘mercy grading’.”

Mr. Nikhil whispers- “Nobody questioned it?”

“Do you think that they can?” She whispers back.

I sat frozen, watching hypocrisy unravel like a badly stitched costume. These weren’t burnt-out teachers trying to survive. They were participants in the performance, performing education without teaching.

After fifteen minutes, I slipped in, grabbed the pen, and walked out like nothing had happened.

Me and Preeti are extremely tired now. It’s not easy to record conversations without anyone noticing but we still carry on.

But truth now had a form.

It was shaped like a pen, disguised as a tool, and filled with the weight of every silent classroom and every hollow promise.

And soon, it would explode.

We knew the fire hadn't burned out yet. And we were right.

Preeti and I had taken the longer route from the library just to pass the staffroom again... this time with the pen camera hidden inside her notebook.

We've gotten good at this. And the teachers, apparently, had gotten worse.

The corridor outside the primary wing is quieter than usual... except for the occasional shuffle of tiny feet and the sharp bite of voices carried too loudly behind thin walls.

I clip the camera pen onto the pocket of my shirt again, lens facing forward, and gave Preeti a silent nod. We've been hearing whispers... little kids too afraid to raise their hands. Some were wetting themselves in fear. We had to see it for ourselves.

We walked slowly past Class Second G, pretending to chat casually. Just then, a child's soft voice trembled from inside.

"Ma'am... Can I go to the washroom please?"

A loud slap of a ruler on a table cracked the air like a gunshot.

"Again? You kids think this is some toilet training center?" came a screech from inside. "Sit down before I make you sit on the floor!"

Preeti's eyes met mine, wide with disbelief. I shifted my shoulder subtly to get a better view.

Through the glass slit in the door, we saw a little boy visibly shaking, clutching his stomach. A girl beside him tried to whisper comfort, but the teacher caught her too.

"You two want to be transferred to the nurse's office permanently? Good. Because that's where you'll end up if you keep interrupting my class!"

The teacher's voice was venom wrapped in volume. Another child stood up and asked, barely louder than a breath.

"Ma'am, please, it's urgent..."

She stormed toward him and jabbed her finger at his face.

"You want 'urgent'? I'll show you urgent! Sit. Down!" Preeti clenched her fists.

I whispered, barely audible, "We got it. Let's move."

As we turned away, the final punch of irony landed behind us.

"And tell your parents you forgot your manners at home, not my fault if you grow up spineless."

We kept walking, the rage boiling under our silence.

The camera in the pen can record up to 9-10 hours after charging. So, I keep it on for the rest of the day.

I record everything. Because now most of the teachers are sitting back and relaxing, me and Rehan are constantly monitoring the class. I record from every angle of the classroom.

Down to every single detail. I record how many of the teachers are wasting time. How they are giving us paragraphs to read from our textbooks and not even solving our doubts.

When any student asks a doubt, the teacher simply *reads* the question instead of answering it or solving it on the board.

And for the first time, I *want* to see this unfair treatment being done to students.

Me seeing it today means the nation seeing it tomorrow.

After begging our parents for permission, we gather up at Dharvi's house.

We told them we went to group study but in reality, we've come to watch the footage.

Dharvi had edited the entire thing and carefully skipped or muted the parts that had any proof that *we* had shot the tape.

"We'll post it," Mira said. "Let the world see the truth."

The others nod.

The entire video screamed corruption.

This could be the start of a revolution.



Chapter 20

Tap send, raise hell.

There were two things I learnt from the guy I met while breaking in the camera room:

1. Not only us but every student, being a part of this corrupt system, is facing major problems which most adults overlook or blame the child for.

2. And second, we can forward the footage anonymously.

“But we don’t know which library it is, bro!” Dharvi is frustrated.

“I can ask him.” I reply.

“Do you know his class and section, Trouble? I’ll see if I know anyone from that class and try to contact him.” Mira asks.

Before I can reply, Dharvi retorts- “She doesn’t even know his name.”

“No, she does,” Preeti says. “It’s Alex, I think?”

“I-”

Dharvi cuts off my reply again. “It’s obviously not his real name, silly. Tavisha, why did you have to put such a

risky milestone in between our plan? It will never work out. We should just-”

“I have his anonymous Id!” I say loudly. I don’t like cutting in people’s conversation, but I do.

Dharvi and Preeti look at each other. Mira blinks at me.

Looking at their surprised expressions, I ask- “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Bro, why didn’t you say this before?” Dharvi looks confused.

“That’s what I was trying to-” I’m interrupted again.

“No,” Mira says, looking puzzled. “What I’m actually wondering is that how in the world did you get time to exchange Id’s in hardly 5 minutes of conversation with a complete stranger?”

I shrug. “That’s not the point. The aim is to get the location from him and get going with our plan.” They nod.

I open my phone and search the account named ‘Anonymous_Alex8’. An account with that username comes up. It doesn’t have a profile pic but the bio says ‘I know you’re curious’ with a winking emoji.

I smirk. “Gotcha.”

— — — — —

It's been an hour and a half since we've been studying. It's our plan B (*not failing*) in case our plan A (*Students' Strike*) doesn't work out.

We created the accounts. One on YouTube. Second on Instagram. Third on Facebook.

We named it '**Students' Strike Official**'.

In the bio we wrote **This isn't chaos. This is correction. Join us #Students'Strike.** And below it we wrote- **'Truth captured in a footage from Regent's Heights school. #RHS'** The initials of our school.

We had sent the friend request to that 'Alex' boy from our new account, still waiting for him to accept it.

Besides Alex, we had sent the request to every student from Regent's Heights who had accounts on any platform. While the accounts are public, we still wanted to spread them like wildfire.

Preeti breaks the long awaiting silence with a question. "I think this Alex will get to know it's you who did the strike."

"What an observation, Sherlock." Dharvi says sarcastically.

Preeti pouts. "What I mean is, how do you know we can trust him?"

Dharvi turns towards me and Mira looks up from her science book.

“I mean,” I think for a second, “there definitely is a risk but I just *know* he won’t snitch. We are all students. We are all facing issues. From what I can interpret about him; he’ll not be against the idea.”

Mira and Preeti nod in understanding. But I can see Dharvi isn’t convinced.

“And one more thing,” I add. “I know what he did. If he can snitch, I can too. He’s not stupid enough to not realize that.”

Dharvi nods.

As soon as we get back to studying, my phone buzzes with a *ting*. I open and see a notification.

“He has accepted my follow request,” I say.

“Maybe he won’t be smart enough to figure out it’s you,” Preeti says.

I shrug.

“Message him.” Mira asks.

“What do I start with?” I think verbally.

“A hello?” Dharvi suggests.

“Okay,” I say.

I type *Hello* and send it.

Who are you? Comes the reply within seconds.

“We don’t have time for this, let’s make it quick and straightforward,” I say and they affirm.

I need your help.’ I type.

For the strike?’

‘Yes. Please tell me the location of the public library you sent the exam papers to. Marble Public Library, wasn’t it? It isn’t showing up on Google maps. The one closest is in Minnesota.’

‘Go to Minnesota then, Tavisha,’ he texts with a laughing emoji.

“Okay, he definitely knows it’s you.” Preeti puts her hands in the air with surprise.

‘It’s not a time to joke around. This is urgent. You lied, didn’t you?’

‘Well, so did you.’

“You lied to him?” Mira asks, looking up from my phone.

“Yeah, I had to. He asked why I broke in the camera room and I said I beat up someone and wanted to see if the cameras caught it.” I say honestly.

‘Ya, I’m sorry. Had to. So did you, I think. It’s fine, really, just tell me the location of the library. The real one.’ I try to close that topic.

‘Hmm... what do I get in return??’ He texts.

“Sheesh, greedy,” says Preeti.

‘Me, not telling the authorities what you did.’

‘Ouch.’ He texts, *‘I could do that too, you know.’*

'Yes, I know. That is why you just have to tell me the location and we have to work together.'

'You won't tell the authorities even if I don't tell you the location because you know that I could snitch on you too. Why would I risk my safety and reveal the library?'

Mira sighs. "He's got a point."

"What do we do now?" Preeti asks.

I recall that I read somewhere about the theory of the three modes of persuasion defined by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Time to check if they work.

"Ethos, Logos and Pathos," I say.

"Are you naming yogurt brands or something, Trouble?" says Dharvi and Preeti laughs at her comment.

"Trust, Logic and Emotion," I explain. "The three modes of persuasion."

"Cut out Ethos, he doesn't trust us." Mira says.

"Legos too." Preeti says, "I don't think his logic would agree on trading valuable information with some colourful building blocks. Kids play with them." She says it so confidently, I wonder if she's joking or not.

Mira and Dharvi look at each other for a second and then, they break into laughter. I can't help but giggle.

"That isn't right, is it?" Preeti laughs too.

I shake my head.

Dharvi's mother comes into the room with a smile. "Hey, girls. I hope you're having fun while studying. I'm bringing some snacks. Your parents will pick you up in an hour."

"Okay, aunty," we say. She smiles at us and closes the door again.

"We've got enough time to upload the video, guys." Preeti says. "I guess." She narrows her eyes.

"But this idiot isn't telling us the location!" Dharvi hisses through her teeth and cups her face in her hands with frustration.

"It's okay, Dharvi. Compose yourself. We've got time, we can do it." I comfort her.

Dharvi nods.

"Let's try Logos," Mira says and then she laughs "*Legos*."

"He won't buy that, he said himself," Dharvi suggests.

"One way to persuade him now," Mira says, "Pathos." I nod and continue typing.

Hey, you'll get something more valuable than everything else. Only if you tell us the location.' I text.

One-minute passes.

Two... Three...

And then, *'What will I get that's so valuable that I'll be willing to put myself into a risk?'* He sends this message.

One word. Just one. *Freedom.*'

After a minute, he types- *Freedom from what? I'm not a prisoner.'*

'Oh, but you are. We all are. As they say, to keep a prisoner bound, make him believe he's free. We all are prisoners to a broken and corrupt education system. The only difference between us and most of the students is that they don't know they're bound. They think it's their own fault. But you and me? We know damn well, it isn't. Help me open their eyes and we'll all be free.'

"Okay, this probably isn't even a mode of persuasion. This is the truth," I say.

"Agreed." Mira says.

I push further.

'If the system wasn't corrupt, you wouldn't have had to go the extra mile for your friend. He would have gotten justice beforehand.'

He replies. *'I know the system is corrupt. I just don't know if I can trust you or not.'*

"Ethos." Mira claims. The girl's a fast learner.

'Yes, you can trust me. I promise I won't tell a soul. What you did was right. I'm always in the favour of a rebel.' I send.

I expect him to argue further but he replies. *'Okay, here's what you do. You don't have to go to a library. You can do it on your laptop too. I figured it would be too risky to tell you the location. But I have more than one way to do things.'*

I take a glance at the Rebels. They nod in approval.

'Teach me.'

The walls of Dharvi's room had melted into silence. A rare, electric stillness. Even the night outside seems to hold its breath.

The streetlights cast flickering gold lines across the window, barely reaching us in the corner where the war plan was finally unfolding.

My laptop sits on the desk. The camera pen lays beside it... our quiet hero, its job done for the day. Inside it hides the footage that will crack the foundations of everything they had tried to hide.

Preeti sits cross-legged on the floor, fidgeting with the end of her hoodie string. Dharvi is curled up in the armchair beside the shelf, Mira leaning over my shoulder.

"Let's watch it one more time," I say.

I open the file. The audio crackled faintly, and then came the high-pitched voice of a child who was nervous and pleading.

"Ma'am, please... I really need to go."

A harsh response cut through the air like a slap.

The video rolled on. Another child, barely in Class 4, stood frozen as an adult towered over her, voice acidic, raining humiliation over something as basic as using the washroom.

My fingers clenched around the edge of the table.

"They scream like they forget these are kids," Mira mutters. "Not prisoners."

I nod. We had heard of it. We had seen bits. But recording it? It felt different. Realer. Like we owed it to every small hand that raised itself for permission and was scolded for simply having a need.

Other clips roll in. The teachers not teaching students. Students panicking under pressure. Unnecessary extra homework. A student of our class, Parth, being wrongly targeted and humiliated by Aabha mam.

Besides the other students, we snuck in little clips of our faces too so that we don't get suspected.

Then the ones that we recorded in the staffrooms. All the faces of the teachers appear who were caught talking about exploitation and being proud of it.

Then came the ones I recorded of dizzy students sitting on extremely hot playground and students not even getting any training to play even when it's included in the fees as "Top sports training in North Delhi."

We even recorded the participation records of students who were not getting merits for representing the school.

Next, we see a washroom and its damaged form with broken toilets, no sanitation products or clean water. We carefully edit it so that they can't interpret if it's a boys' washroom or a girls' one.

Then a clip of the medical room where I had gone with an excuse to 'return a pen'. I kept the pen there for some time and it recorded how the school nurse was giving digestive tablets to injured children and charging money for medicines and girls' sanitation products.

Another clip rolls in. In it, the camera records a pinboard with the printed advertisements of overpriced school trips that cover the picture of the students who won recent competitions.

And then, finally the one that makes our blood boil the most-

The clip where Mrs. Harsha unjustly fires Mrs. Shalini and Mrs. Manisha just because they were against corruption.

This is proof of what this system really is.

And fun fact- The British colonizers introduced it during the colonial period for a generation supply of cheap clerks, employees and teachers who carry out their ideas into the young minds of the future.

They wanted mindless Indians who worked when told and never asked why.

The colonizers might have left the country but they left a system that is still practiced like a standard of living.

That's why they humiliate us in the name of obedience. Exhaust us in the name of well-being. Punish us in the name of practice. And make us all think the same way and go down a certain path in life.

The ones who really follow their passions in this country are termed as ‘failures’.

I minimized the video window.

The anonymous accounts we had made weren’t gaining much attention. A few people had accepted the requests.

Our first post was a blurry picture of an assignment with a sarcastic caption: “Thank you, educational system, for reminding me that sleep is optional but unnecessary homework is essential.” The second post had been a quote: “When systems fail, voices rise.” Nothing loud yet. Just shadows whispering.

But this? This was going to echo.

If we’ll succeed, our greatest achievement would be leaving behind the blueprint only rebels see.

"Ready?" Mira asked.

My mouse hovered over the ‘upload’ button. I typed a caption.

What They Call Discipline – Inside a School’s Walls.
#Students’Strike #RHS’ Then, I hit play one last time.

We all watched in silence. Again.

The students. The helplessness. The mocking laughter of a few teachers who clearly didn’t care. Even Mira, usually the emotionally strongest of us, exhaled like she’d been punched.

I hit ‘upload’.

The bar moved slower than I expected. Almost cruelly.
A tiny circle of patience in a world that had lost its way.

Upload complete.

We finish uploading the footage on rest of our accounts too.

A beat of silence.

"Description?" Preeti asked, her voice unsteady but certain.

Dharvi looked at me. "Say what it is. Not what they want to hear."

I began to type:

'They tell us to respect authority. We ask... what if authority forgets how to respect us?'

Post.

Done.

The 'Alex' boy turned out to be a crazy computer savvy (All surprising except the first part- crazy). He had taught us how to open some weird website from which we mailed the footage to five different news channels anonymously.

Dharvi also had a good knowledge about websites. We made her check everything twice, in case Alex was tricking us.

We knew it won't blow up suddenly but we still had our hopes high.

Regent's Heights was one of the most expensive private schools in Delhi. It had quite the reputation, all which had come from fooling people like most of the schools in this organization do.

I shut the laptop slowly. None of us spoke for a while.

It hits me. *We can succeed.* And even if we don't, we've studied enough to pass the exams with a decent grade because we had extra tuitions and help from each other. But not all students have that kind of facility.

Though if the strike does not happen, it would kill me to see others fail and they would even be blamed for it, but still, we would always know that we were the first ones to *try*.

"We could still get caught if by any chance we had left some sort of evidence." Mira sighs with anxiety.

"Momo, we've been planning and plotting this strike from the past week." I say, "For once, let's forget everything and celebrate what we did. We took the first step to a revolution."

Preeti and Dharvi beam at my words. Mira's anxiety seems to fade away.

This time, not because of a joke. But because of the fact that we knew we were the first ones to take the first step. "We're not in the shadows anymore." Mira whispers but her voice is clear.

I grin. "We did our part, planted the seeds of truth. Now we'll see if they grow into a forest of rebellion."

We celebrate with music. I put up the song *Steal My Girl* by One Direction and connect my laptop to Dharvi's speaker.

She been my queen since we were sixteen...

I sing along the music. Preeti joins me.

Everybody wanna steal my girl, everybody wanna take her heart away...

Mira and Dharvi join us. The song somewhat turns into a chant. The silence that surrounded us a few minutes before had seemed to join our celebration.

Couple billion in the whole wide world. Find another one 'cause she belongs to me...

I grab a hairbrush, pretending it to be a microphone and leap on top of the bed. Mira twirls Preeti with her fingers and Dharvi records us.

"Turn it up, Trouble!" Preeti yells.

Kisses like cream, her walk is so mean. And every jaw drops when she's in those jeans. Alright, alright...

We dedicate those lines to Preeti while she does a short, dramatic cat walk, pacing the bedroom floor.

I don't exist if I don't have her, the sun doesn't shine, the world doesn't turn...

These to Mira as we put up our phone flashlights giving her spotlight, and dim the lights.

We continued dedicating all the stanzas one by one to each other. This was girlhood captured in the moments I wish would never end.

Find another one cause she belongs to me...

We weren't just singing. We claimed those minutes as our own. "We did it!" I shout.

We all end up pillow-fighting and giggling for what seemed endlessly.

I post one final spark on the account after I get to my home. A poem. Or rather, an instruction manual to be a part of the strike.

**When shrill screams split the air,
Don't freeze, don't stare, don't pretend you care.
Drop the pen, forget the score.
March outside, this is war.**

**To the grounds, rebels, don't delay-
Monday's the day we strike their play.
If your back's been bent by fake success,
If your spark's been smothered under stress.**

**Step out proud, break the rules.
This is bigger than their schools.
You're not just a roll number that day.
You're a rebel so move your own way.**

Walk. Run.
Stumble. Fly.
But reach the ground,
ask them why.

They fear our unity,
our echoing shout.
In the darkness we rise,
their lights will go out.

March with fire,
make it loud.
Be the storm,
not the crowd.

Burn the silence,
beat the mic-
Our bevy calls this
Students' Strike.

It's the rebels who make history,
the ones who don't win or lose.
It's the rebels who reason with misery,
the ones who dare to choose.

And I, you ask?

I'll be in the shadows,
not highlighted nor seen.
But I'll play a great part,
by scheming great schemes.

— — — — —

Sunday Morning – 6:45 a.m.

Now, I'm not a morning person but this morning was *different*. Not different like a birthday morning, but like one before an international trip with family. Hurried. Hasty. *Chaotic*.

My phone is buzzing violently against the pillow. It's like the universe is shaking me awake. Preeti had already sent fifty messages in our group chat:

CHICA: "Check the account."

CHICA: "Guys, we're blowing up. 3M+ views on YouTube!!!"

CHICA: "2M+ on Insta and Facebook!!!"

CHICA: “45k likes. 901 shares. Read the comments!!”

OSTRICH: “Holly shi- Wth?!”

CHICA: “Where is Trouble and Momo?!!!”

OSTRICH: “Sleepy heads.”

I sit up. Heart thumping. Opened each one of the accounts.

The video had gone viral.

Comments poured in like a raging river.

Many of them shared their own experiences.

“This happened to my niece. She’s six years old and peed herself because the teacher didn’t let her use the restroom.”

“Unbelievable. Is this what we’re paying fees for? As a single mother, I work three to four shifts a day just so my son could get a decent education.”

“This step is highly appreciated. Me and my wife worked as teachers in a private school for a few years. We always had a soft corner for kids but were constantly threatened to lose our jobs if we spoke up against all this.”

“Expose more. We’re listening now. This video is gold.” Said another.

Some comments opposing us were posted there too:

“I can’t believe students nowadays are complaining that much. We were the last innocent generation.”

‘These Gen- α kids know nothing about real education. When we were in school, we were punished on hot grounds for hours on end.’

These people are literally glamorizing harsh punishments given to *children* as ‘real education’. These are children whose parents are working day and night to pay expensive fees of private schools.

There were some weird comments too, like:

‘bvhbjvkmbhdsfsesg’ I think someone left their cat near their computer.

‘It is definitely a market stunt that the school had planned for more rich-influencer-kid admissions.’

‘Aliens recorded this video to kidnap students.’ Someone had written with an alien emoji.

‘I know who you are.’

‘Here’s a recipe for baking cookies at home...’ Someone legit wrote a whole recipe.

‘People watching this in 2024, like this comment.’ I can’t believe 167 people actually liked that stupid comment. The video was posted just recently.

I couldn’t read all the comments. *All 7.3k of them.*

One message stood out. A DM.

@IndYouthVoice: ‘We’d like to feature your footage in our student spotlight story tonight. Anonymous credit. Urgent reply needed.’

I held my breath. Typed: *‘Yes. Use it. The story matters more than us.’*

CHICA: “@TavishaSinghal @MiraTripathi Guys, you alive??”

MOMO: “Aye-aye captain.”

TROUBLE (ME): “Guys, @IndYouthVoice asked to feature our video!!!”

OSTRICH: “Suiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

CHICA: “Yayyyyyyyyyyyyy!!!!” Followed by a sea of emojis.

MOMO: “Guys! Turn on the news channels.”

I do in an instant. It turns out that three out of five news channels had featured our video. On the first channel, the headings flash in bold, red letters:

“Undercover Footage Exposes Deep Corruption in Schools- Anonymous Student Video Sparks Nationwide Outrage.”

The other two were something similar.

OSTRICH: “Brooooo.... Shut Upppp.”

CHICA: “What did Momo do? Why are you shutting her up? @DharviGarg.”

MOMO: “Girl, it’s an expression.”

I laugh and shake my head.

Without the Rebels, I would have never reached here.

We were no longer just students with complaints.

We were evidence.

A movement.

A voice crafted from recordings, rage, and the refusal
to stay silent.

We had raised chaos and rage.

We had raised *Hell*.

The first domino had fallen.

And we were the ones who pushed it.



Chapter 21

Bite the bullet, babes.

The calendar said 'Monday' but the morning air screamed *Mayhem*.

Mira fixed her collar. Dharvi cracked her knuckles. Preeti said in her lady voice- "Let's ruin their day, shall we?"

And I? I smiled, knowing damn well that if we succeeded today, we'd be legends. But if we failed... we'd still walk out as legends.

It was the kind of Monday that History books forget... but radicals never do.

We walked those silent hallways together, going to our class, wearing invisible capes behind our backs. This was the type of calm that comes before the storm.

"You sure you instructed them properly?" Dharvi asks me.

Mira replies for me- "She did. Don't worry now. We did everything we could. Just sit back and watch the show, Ostrich."

"Yeah," I add, "It's D-day, darling." I grin.

Preeti narrows her eyes. “Dream-day or Dooms-day? And for which side?”

Me and Mira share a smirk as I reply- “We’re about to find out.”

— — — — —

Let’s get one thing straight-

The rest of the school is buzzing like a beehive after someone kicked it.

Tears in the bathrooms. Panicked scribbles in the hallways.

Students of 8-A seem to be having a *Keertan* as they loudly chant prayers in chorus. They even start to create music with clapping their hands and tapping pens against the desks.

I waved Lavina and Shanaya a hand as they went into 8-C.

8-D was being told the exam rules by Mr. Nikhil. I heard someone ask him about the viral footage. A duster being slammed on a desk, echoes in the corridor as Mr. Nikhil puts the duster back and shuts the classroom door.

In 8-B, a girl on the first bench is sobbing with her face buried in the desk. The teacher was scolding her for doing that.

I whispered in my mind as if she could hear me “*Don’t worry, all this would be ending in exactly eighteen minutes.*”

The school was a mess but class 8-F? The certified disaster of the school? We were chilling.

Okay, maybe not *chilling*, chilling but like waiting-for-an-explosion-while-eating-a-lollipop-chilling.

Our class was the reason the school was on edge.

We were the glitch in the system.

The whispers in the staffrooms.

The reason teachers kept hissing- *“Why are kids like this these days?”*

A lot of pressure was being put on Mrs. Vaishali too. Teachers kept asking her questions. She answered in low voices and kept wiping beads of sweat from her forehead with a handkerchief when the weather wasn’t even that hot.

The questions were like-

“It was someone from your class. Do you have no idea who it is?”

“Vaishali, someone from your class sneaked in a freaking camera in the school premises and you didn’t even bat an eye?”

“A 13-year-old raised a national controversy right under your nose and you knew nothing. How are we going to answer the principal?”

Mrs. Vaishali knew from day 1 that our class was trouble. But what she didn’t know was that *Trouble* was in our class. *Me*.

The exam hasn't even started yet but our classroom already had the *main character energy*. Teachers were coming and going like amongst the forty-four students of 8-F, one of us was a hidden celebrity. Or maybe a criminal.

Someone was fake yawning. Mira was rearranging her pens for the 5th time in colour order like the fate of the world depended on whether blue comes before green. Dharvi was counting the ceiling tiles. Preeti had drawn a tiny grave on the back of a notebook and written "*R.I.P Academic Pressure.*"

I check again whether all of the windows are closed tightly. They do it so that students don't get distracted looking out the windows or come up with any ideas for cheating. Little do they know, we came up with worse.

Now, there wasn't much left except to wait for the *Tick. Tick. Boom.*

"Don't play too innocent." Vaishali mam slams a register onto a desk. "The video was shot by someone from this class. You're not that clever. That little trick won't work for long. I will find you!"

The Rebels side-eye each other from across the seats we were made to sit in because of the sitting arrangement. We smile without smiling. Eyes can do a lot.

"And that stupid poem? Shrill screams? What shrill screams? No scream is loud enough to provoke an entire school!" Vaishali mam shouts. "And run where? To the grounds? Wherever you run, your exams will be taken

away, we will catch you and you will be straight away expelled.”

I wonder... *How will you expel more than four thousand students, mam?*

When threatening doesn't work, Vaishali mam calls Mrs. Harsha. She has her own ways to deal with students.

“Good morning, Eighth F.” She greets us.

We all stand up from our seats. We know we ain't afraid of anyone today. So, our class, for the first time, greets the strictest teacher in our school with our *extremely humble morning greeting*.

“Good morning *mam* !!!!!” We sing.

She can't do anything. “Sit down.” And we do.

“As you all know, that absurd footage of our school was leaked on Friday evening. Someone from this class did it. They not only disrespected themselves but also the dignity of Regent's Heights school.” Her eyes dart from face to face like she's scanning our souls.

But the students of the rotten class blink at her like clueless saints.

Mrs. Harsha clears her throat. “If you did it, you can step out and come to my office. We have a nice little talk; you won't get expelled and I'll save you. I promise. All you have to do is step out.”

As soon as she says that, I lean back on the desk behind me and cross my arms. Mira continues rearranging

her pens. Dharvi turns her face towards the ceiling tiles. Preeti starts to doodle again at the back of her notebook.

Other students also resume doing whatever they were before Mrs. Harsha came in. Some yawn. Some start to draw on the desk. Some of us lay their heads on desks and nap.

Sakshi, Simran and Yash pretend to be the most responsible and sincere ones. Vedant, sitting just in front of me looks at me. When I look at him, he quickly turns away.

One of the students by mistakenly tumbles his bottle on the floor followed by a loud metallic sound of it falling. Another one, does the same thing but on purpose. Then another. Another. One more.

This happens seven times in a row until Mrs. Harsha says, “Enough! If that student wants to get saved, he can come to my office anytime.”

The Rebels shoot each other a perplexed look. *He?*

Then it hits us. They think it’s a ‘he’ who planned the strike. *How stereotypical.*

They think only a boy is smart enough to do so. They also think that girls are angels who blindly follow the rules and regulations that society imposes on us.

Not these girls, no. You’re mistaken, mam.

We’re devils with angelic faces. We’re the Rebels with dangerous graces.

“Fifteen minutes are over. Half an hour is left!”
Vaishal mam reminds.

Divya, Utkarsh and Reet are shaking silently in their seats but Mrs. Vaishali pays them no mind and whenever any student asks her for any kind of help, she ignores them.

All this is about to end any second now.

One-minute passes... Two... Three... Nothing.

The Rebels have seemed to notice too. They look up from their sheets and glance at the clock. Only one way to find out what had happened.

“Mam, may I go use the restroom?” I ask.

Mrs. Vaishali narrows her eyes. “Have you completed the test?”

“Yes, mam.” I smile.

“Okay, be quick.”

As I expected, Lavina is standing there. It was our spot to meet if something goes wrong.

“What happened? Why hasn’t it happened yet?” I ask.

“Girl, I don’t know! I think they suspected that we would cut off the lights. The security there is tight. No one I can just sneak in.”

I’m panicking. If this goes wrong, everything will backfire.

Lavina takes a breath. “If this goes wrong, it’s not just us. *It’s everyone who trusted us along the way.*”

Breathe and think.

The voice is here again. The stupid internal intrusive voice that got me into this.

There’s no going back now.

I exhale. “Manchurian...”

“Yeah?”

“We’ll have to bite the bullet, babes.”

— — — — —

This is the riskiest and most hurried plan I’ve made yet.

Lavina throws a metal compass towards a window and it shatters into a thousand pieces like shards of obedience.

She hides in the girls’ washroom.

All the security guards rush towards the scene. They can’t enter the girls’ restroom so they go look for a maid.

In the meantime, I turn off the main panel of electricity and lock the box with the key that one of I.V group’s members had stolen.

I throw it out of the little space between two broken windows.

It all goes dark.

It all goes wild.

Screams, shouts, blindness fill the air. The classrooms would have no time to open all the windows. The students won't let it happen.

I run as fast as I can as the security guards and maids try to catch me. All that basketball training is coming handy today. They can't see my face because it is dark and only a little light is seeping in through the almost-closed windows.

"STOP!" One of the maid shouts in a raspy voice.

My heart beats fast against my chest. They are so close. I try to run in another direction but they surround me. I push one of them and run.

As I sprint down the hallway, the sound of footsteps grows louder behind me. My heart pounds like a drum. A guard's flashlight beam sweeps past, missing me by inches. I duck into a storage closet, holding my breath as the footsteps pause outside. *Please don't open the door.*

After what felt like an eternity, the footsteps fade. I slip out, adrenaline coursing through my veins. I'm drenched in sweat. I feel like I could pass out... *If give I up here, all this would be in vain.* So, I don't and calm myself down.

My classroom is just beside the restroom. I see that Lavina has safely escaped too. Or rather *feel* it. We had made a signal for the darkness.

Three taps on the shoulder to indicate safety.

"Everyone! Calm down!" Vaishali mam shouts. But everyone is causing a havoc.

Now, it's time to pretend. "Mam, what happened?" I say with a voice of deep concern to Vaishali mam.

"Tavisha, don't worry. I'm glad you're here now. Help Rehan open the windows. Use my phone's flashlight."

She tries to find her phone in her pouch.

This all is about to explode any second now.

And... there it is. The shrill sound.

It started like a whisper.

Like a flicker of a tube light.

A pause in someone's breath.

But then-

RIIINNNGGGG!!!

The fire alarm.

The Intervention group had done its part with flying colours. Lavina had instructed The Voice (except for the Rebels) with notebook letters to quietly slip out of their classrooms and put off the fire alarms. I'm not sure how exactly they did it but that clever fox- Lavina, has her own ways of getting things done without a trace left behind.

This was something we should never do but desperate times, desperate measures.

This time, the fire wasn't in the school building, but it was in our hearts.

The fire alarm screamed like it had been waiting for years to be heard.

Breathing. Panic.

And then-

CHAOS... *Oh, my favorite word.*

Students screamed. Not from fear but from *release*. We all tore our question papers because we were the ones questioning now.

Bits of paper were being thrown into the air like confetti.

Mira launched her exam sheets in the air.

Preeti knocked her chair back as she stood. *Dramatic*, of course.

Dharvi, an expert in changing voices, climbed on top of the desk and screamed while tearing exam sheets. “VIVA LA REBELLION!!!!”

I scream too- “INQILAB ZINDABAD!!!!”

Preeti and Mira join us and scream too. “STUDENTS’ STRIKE! STUDENTS’ STRIKE! STUDENTS’ STRIKE!”

Soon the entire class joins me like a chant. We boke the words into a rhythm like ‘Stu-dents’-strike!’

The staff would never know who sparked it in between all the havoc. But soon, those two words will be spoken by every single mouth in the entire school that had longed to speak for years.

Every desk in 8-F shook. We all poured out of the classroom. Pages flying, pencils snapping underfoot.

The teachers tried to shout over the alarm.

“STOP!”

“WHO CUT THE POWER?”

“THIS IS ILLEGAL!”

“YOU’LL ALL GET SUSPENDED!”

“Great” Mira runs beside me to match my pace, “I need a break anyways.” I laugh.

A teacher tries to block the hallway. We slip right past him like water.

“A FULL TEN MARKS BONUS FOR ANYONE WHO STAYED.” Mrs. Vaishali offers.

No one stayed except for Sakshi. I could make out only a little of their group conversation amongst the noise.

“Sakshi, come on!” Yash yells.

“No! We stay!”

“Sakshi, it’s not worth it. Come on, it will be fun.” Simran calls out. “Stop being this way for once!”

Sakshi roars with anger. “You think I like being this way? I have no choice! If I’m not on the top, I’m nothing at all.” Even her group has ditched her now.

We kicked open the doors of other classrooms too. 8-G, 8-H, 8E, 8-D, 8-C, 8-B, 8-A, 9-A, 9-B, 9-C... and so on until the entire school had joined us.

Students from other sections joined. Some hesitant, some thrilled. The tension from all of those years, all of those rules, all of those stupid punishments- gone in a flash.

The corridors were rivers. We were the flood.

The speakers screeched. "STUDENTS, PLEASE CALM DOWN. UPHOLD THE REPUTATION OF REGENT'S HEIGHTS!"

How to uphold the reputation of an already corrupt school, sir?

This was the day where class 8-F was leading the movement. History might remember the rotten class... and not fondly.

"Rebellion looks good on us, no?" Preeti asks. The Rebels laugh. Though we cannot see each other in the dark, we can still hear each other. We know we started this together and we'll end this together too.

This wasn't mischief, this was a message.

They marked us as disobedient. We marked the beginning of change.

Now even the junior students have joined us. The classes above us too.

I had requested Lavina to instruct the intervention group about carefully locking the corridors of the students from 4th grade and below so they don't get trampled, or scared by the huge mob.

They'll thank the seniors they had never even met.

The ground was waiting for us like it knew we were coming.

Every child screaming "STUDENTS' STRIKE!

STUDENTS' STRIKE! STUDENTS' STRIKE!" like a chant in unity.

Sunlight hit our faces. Wind in our hair.

The student body had *finally* heard us.

The students take up every single space on the H.P.E ground.

We are still screaming on top of our lungs.

The principal stands on the second-floor balcony, mic in hand, voice slicing through the sirens and chaos like a knife:

"ENOUGH!!!"

The fire alarm gets silenced. The silence felt heavier than the noise.

He clears his throat. "*This*-this is not bravery. This is betrayal. Your parents trusted us. You think a viral video and some torn papers can make you do whatever you like? You're children."

His eyes scanned the sea of students gathered on the grounds.

"What you've done today will follow you. On records. On applications. On futures."

Some kids stopped chanting. Some took slow steps back.

The fear was crawling in again.

“Anyone who leaves now, quietly, will not be punished. But if you stay, there will be consequences.”

We all can feel it. The tension. The shaking doubt. The pause in the storm.

Mira shakes her head. Preeti and Dharvi look at me with wide eyes.

For a second- it felt like we’d lost.

Then- CRASH.

The front gates burst open.

Metal clanging. Voices rising.

Cameras. Reporters. Parents. Phones out. Lights flashing.

“ARE YOU SEEING THIS?”

“LOOK WHAT THEY’VE BEEN HIDING.”

“THIS IS THE SCHOOL FROM THE VIRAL CLIP. COMING LIVE FROM REGENT’S HEIGHTS.”

People with microphones and camera break in along with a sea of parents.

The guards can’t hold them back. The moment those gates opened, something lit up inside us again.

Preeti grabs my hand. “We brought the outside world in.”

Mira answers- “Now they have to listen.”

Dharvi yells, “Lights or no lights... our truth’s out now.”

Preeti and Mira climb up on the football net’s railing with some other students from 8-F and Arun shouts: “If there are consequences, bring them on!”

“It’s our right to freedom of speech and expression!” Mira shouts.

Preeti adds loud enough for about four hundred of us to hear- “Go cry about it but at least make it aesthetic.”

Cheers explode. The students who had stepped back, step forward again.

Because we aren’t just fighting now.

We were witnessed. And nothing scares a broken system more... than being seen.

“STUDENTS’ STRIKE! STUDENTS’ STRIKE!

STUDENTS’ STRIKE!” It filled the air again.

Even louder now.

The principal slowly backed out.

Me, Preeti, Mira and Dharvi hold each other’s hands as we laugh. Raw. Rich. Victorious laughter.

We walked in as students but we’ll walk out as legends. As stories.

Well, we weren't exactly troublemakers. The school just had a very low tolerance for honesty.

The Rebels weren't just loud. We made rebellion an art. We left behind a blueprint. We cracked the first foundation stone... now we'll watch the empire fall.

Change is the only artist that paints the canvas of history. And it's the rebels who bring the change.

It's the rebels who make history.



EPILOGUE

Ashes of obedience.

The document that took me two continuous sleepless nights to write was as followed-

Regent's Heights School

New Delhi

Date: 2nd May, 2024

To,

The Honorable Minister of Education

Government of India

New Delhi

Subject: A Student-Crafted Blueprint for Reforming India's Education System

Respected Sir,

We write this not as rebels, but as students who have tasted the sharp edge of silence for too long.

This is not a complaint. This is not a plea. This is a proposal.

Following the events of the Student Strike at Regent's Heights School, we, the student body, united in voice,

purpose, and hope, present to you a blueprint. It's not perfect. But neither was the system we were born into.

We believe real education builds humans. And so, we ask you to read this not as authority, but as empathy wearing a uniform and carrying a school bag.

Key Demands for Systemic Change:

1. Prioritize Mental Health
 - Weekly mental health sessions as part of the curriculum.
 - Certified counselors, not just moral lectures.
 - Safe spaces for students to talk, vent, breathe.
 - Training for teachers to recognize and support mental health issues.
2. Limit Academic Pressure
 - Homework should enhance, not exhaust. · Limits on assessments per term.
 - Encouragement of learning styles beyond routine memorization.
3. Recognize the Whole Student
 - Equal recognition for creative, social, and athletic achievements.
 - Portfolios and projects to matter as much as final exams.
4. Create Democratic Classrooms

- Monthly student-teacher feedback circles that have actual impact.
 - Student-elected councils involved in real decision-making.
5. Train the Teachers Too
 - Workshops on mental health, inclusivity, and modern teaching.
 - No more shame tactics. No more threats.
 - Processes to protect teachers who raise concerns.
 6. Dismantle Toxic Discipline
 - Public humiliation has no place in education.
 - Build respect, not fear.
 - Strict action against educators who harass, humiliate, or discriminate.
 - Zero tolerance for educators who ignore their duties or favor corruption.
 7. Integrate Real-Life Skills
 - Teach taxes, consent, creative writing, empathy, civic rights.
 - Make us citizens, not just students.
 8. End the One-Size-Fits-All System
 - Recognize neurodivergent students.
 - Adjust expectations, don't crush potential.

9. Eradicate Bullying Completely
 - Enforce zero tolerance policies with real consequences.
 - Anonymous reporting systems that work.
 - Awareness programs led by both students and staff.
10. Ensure Clean, Safe Facilities
 - Maintain hygienic, accessible bathrooms with running water and sanitation checks.
 - Provide sanitary products in all girls' restrooms.
 - Clean drinking water to be available at all times.
 - Regular cleaning of classrooms and common areas. Students cannot learn in filth.
11. Revise Fee Structures
 - Transparency in fee collection and spending.
 - No unjustified fee hikes.
 - Scholarships and fee waivers for underprivileged students.
12. Ensure Gender Equality
 - Zero tolerance for gender-based judgement.
 - Workshops to challenge stereotypes.
 - Equal treatment and opportunities for all.

- Encourage collaboration, mutual respect, and empathy among all students, rather than unhealthy competition.
 - Integrate lessons that teach boys and girls to value and respect each other, breaking ingrained biases.
- 13. Strengthen Career Guidance & Life Skills
 - Offer career counselling sessions to help students explore academic and vocational options.
 - Encourage project-based learning that builds practical skills and confidence.
 - Create platforms for students to discover and develop their individual talents beyond academics.
- 14. Support and Empower Teachers too
 - Provide training and professional development to improve teaching skills and classroom management.
 - Offer access to teaching resources, technology, and lesson-planning tools.

- Reduce administrative workload to allow more focus on teaching and mentoring.
- Encourage collaborative teaching and peer support networks among staff.
- Recognize and reward teachers' efforts to motivate and retain talent.

We know revolution sounds loud. Ours began with whispers in classrooms, notes shared in secrecy, and poems scribbled in notebooks. It ended with fire alarms and a message that traveled far louder:

Change isn't optional. It's overdue.

We hope this letter reaches your desk, but more importantly, we hope it reaches your heart.

This was our first step. What happens next... is in your hands.

Yours sincerely,

The Student Body

Regent's Heights School



AUTHOR'S NOTE

And... that's about it. The dramatic journey of the Rebels.

But, before you put the book down, I must share some things.

See... while this story is written in first person and the main character shares my name; the events, experiences, and opinions in this book are entirely fictional. I wanted the main character to resemble my voice so much that I ended up giving her my name.

This novel is a work of fiction, meant to explore themes of courage, justice, and friendship... not a reflection of my personal life.

The characters, schools, and events portrayed are products of my imagination and are not intended to represent real people or institutions. Any resemblance to actual individuals or places is purely coincidental.

While the themes reflect real frustrations within educational system, the story is a creative exploration and not a direct accusation or political statement. It is meant to spark dialogue, not controversy.

It's not every day that you finish writing a novel dripping with rebellion, rage and refusal. So, I'll tell you how it started.

I'm a student myself. I started this novel at the beginning of grade eight, in April 2024, at the age of 13, sitting in a train, writing the first sentence.

But the idea of this novel had occurred to me before when, as a daydreamer, I sat alone on the furthest seat of my school's computer lab one day and thought- *What if the building gets demolished by students?*

But it didn't seem realistic, so, naturally... I wrote a novel about it. Most of the plot may have changed while I wrote it but the vibe is still the same.

It took me about a year to complete it.

I'm 14 now. This novel is about to be published. I can't believe that all those sleepless nights, being glued to the laptop screen, will finally pay off.

The story that only existed as a Word PDF will come to life in the form of ink and paper.

I would like to thank my parents for supporting me and my brother for tolerating the clicking noise of keyboard keys for a whole year, while trying to sleep at night.

I would like to thank my school friends who might not be the Rebels but are as amazing as them (and remember, it's better to have a small group of real friends rather than a big group with snakes.)

I would also be thanking every teacher, every student, every stranger and every event that directly or indirectly inspired my novel.

Some might have been harsh to me but they helped me in becoming an author, unknowingly. And in the end... it is a thing to be grateful about.

I've spent a whole lot of effort on each and every word of this novel... So, lastly, I thank you from the bottom of my heart, dear reader, for reading each one of those words. ♥

To every student who has ever questioned the rules: this one was for you.

