

RISE OF THE GOLDEN WARRIORS OF BHOPAL

LOVE, LOSS, AND UNSUNG HEROES
OF THE COVID ERA

Faiz Irshad



BlueRose ONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

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S t o r i e s M a t t e r
New Delhi • London

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ISBN: 978-93-7542-194-8

Cover design: Faiz Irshad
Typesetting: Namrata Saini

First Edition: January 2026



"Their Sacrifice, Their Strength, Their Story"

"If no one will touch them, I will."

The corpse lay wrapped in plastic—rotting under a sky that didn't care. A son. A father. A man whose name the world had already forgotten.

But in April 2020, Bhopal was a graveyard of the living. Streets empty. Fear thick as smoke. Behind locked doors, families watched their loved ones drown from the inside, gasping as their own lungs turned to stone.

Then came Rehan Golden.

No hero. No miracle-worker. Just a man with rough hands and a heart that refused to break. The last man standing when the world looked away.

While the system crumbled and the rich hid, he gathered the forgotten. They dug graves with bare hands until their fingers split. Carried the dying on their backs when no ambulance would come. Fed the hungry until their own bodies gave out.

And when Death finally came for Rehan—it stumbled.

"Seventy-two hours."

That's what the doctors wrote. Seventy-two hours until the virus won.

The hospital held its breath. Nurses moved like ghosts. Machines beeped the countdown to the end. The air itself ached for his last gasp.

But Death... hesitated.

It leaned in—close enough for Rehan to taste its cold breath—and stopped.

Something in his broken hands, still curled like fists from digging graves, refused to let go. Something in his ruined lungs, whispering:

"Not yet."

The clock froze.

The doctors stared.

And Death—for the first time—stepped back.

"God gave me a second life," he choked, blood on his lips,
"not for me... but for the ones still screaming in the dark."

Even as his own family fell, one by one, Rehan stood. Heart in pieces. Spirit unbroken. **"The greatest duty in the eyes of Almighty,"** his brother had told him before becoming another victim, **"is to serve humanity."**

Some heroes wear no armor. Just a mask soaked in sweat and tears and the raw, bleeding will to say:

"They matter. Even if no one sees them."

This is the true story of the man who buried the abandoned.

The man who stared into hell... and made it look away.

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Introduction: The City That Wouldn't Break

Bhopal has known too much pain.
In 1984, poison gas stole thousands of breaths. In 2020,
an invisible virus came for the rest.

But here's the truth about my city: **every time the world
expects us to fall, someone stands up.**

This is the story of one man who stood taller than most—
Rehan Golden.

When COVID-19 choked our streets with fear, Rehan became
the light we couldn't see but desperately needed. He fed the
hungry when system failed. He held the sick when families
were too afraid to touch them. He buried the dead when no one
else would come near.





A Tribute to Humanity: Rehan Golden and His Team Honored for Pandemic Efforts

Many respected leaders and community figures have recognized the bravery of Rehan Golden and his team. Their words remind us of the true power of selfless service:

1. Ex-Governor Aziz Qureshi:

- *"Rehan Golden and his team did not just serve—they fought a war without weapons. When death walked the streets, they stood as shields. Their bravery was not ordinary—it was legendary. History will remember them as the purest form of humanity."*

2. Ex-Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan:

- The former Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh praised Rehan's efforts as a standout act of courage in the toughest moments of the pandemic.

3. Ex-High Court Judge Faheem Anwar:

- *"When I lost my brother, grief blinded me. But in that darkness, Rehan Golden was there—not just for me, but for every soul who needed help. He treated the dead with respect, the living with love. Bhopal will never forget his kindness."*

4. DIG Irshad Wali (Bhopal Police):

- *The Bhopal Police honored them because words alone could never repay their sacrifice. They were not just helpers—they were warriors.*

5. DSP PHQ Nash Kumar Pandole (Bhopal Police):

- *"Rehan Golden is not a hero from movies—he is greater. Movies end, but his courage still lives in the hearts of those he saved. He showed us what real strength looks like."*

6. TI Virendra Singh Chouhan (Bhopal Police):

- *"He lost everything—money, health, even loved ones—but never his heart. While others hid, he ran toward danger. His name will be whispered with respect for generations."*

7. Anju Dubey, Wife of Late IAS Officer Masood Akhtar:

- *"When hope was dying, Rehan Golden became its beating heart. He did not just help—he gave us a reason to believe in goodness again."*

8. Dr. Anil Bhargav (Owner of Charak Hospital Group):

- *"He found beds for the sick, food for the hungry, and dignity for the dead. While others closed their doors, he opened his arms. Bhopal owes him more than gratitude—it owes him its soul."*

9. Dr. Rajesh Verma:

- *"Rich or poor, Hindu or Muslim—Rehan Golden never asked. He only saw humans in pain. His love had no religion, no limits—only endless giving."*

Certificates of Honor: Proof That Heroes Walk Among Us

- **Khel and Khiladi Prakoshth, Madhya Pradesh Congress Committee:**
 - For a man who did not just fight the pandemic—he fought despair itself.
- **Khidmat-e-Khalq Satna:**
 - *"A Corona Warrior who did not wear a cape—but carried the weight of a broken city on his shoulders."*
- **UFF Group:**
 - *"With tears of gratitude, we salute his endless fight against suffering."*
- **Mansoori Samaj Society:**
 - *"He walked through fire to save strangers. That is not just bravery—that is divinity in human form."*
- **Ex-MLA PC Sharma:**
 - *"His hands did not just help—they rebuilt lives."*
- **Ahirwar Samaj Sangh Bharat:**
 - *"In a world that teaches us to fear, he taught us to love."*
- **MLA Arif Masood:**
 - *"A true hero does not seek fame—he seeks change. And Rehan Golden changed Bhopal forever."*





The Weight of a Promise

The old table lamp cast a warm, golden circle of light in our small living room. In that circle sat my mother, her eyes shining with a love so pure it felt like a prayer. Every time I read a new chapter aloud, she would listen not just with her ears, but with her entire soul.

“Son,” she’d say, her voice soft but sure, “we have lost so many people we loved. Your words... they will build a home for their memories. You will make them live forever.”

Her belief echoed my father's, who had once whispered to me, *“The greatest thing you can do in this life is help someone else.”*

My father wasn't a man for grand gestures or expensive gifts. His love was in the small things. I remember he always had a pocketful of cheap, hard orange toffees. Whenever I was upset or had a bad day at school, he wouldn't say much. He'd just quietly press one into my hand, the crinkle of its simple wrapper a secret language between us. They were lovely parents. Before COVID, I had a home, a family, a life filled with their laughter and love. Now, I am orphaned—an empty house, empty chairs where they once sat, silence where their voices used to sing.

Fueled by their belief, I threw myself into the fire. Every morning, I would begin my ritual of sending my story to publishers, and every day the rejections came. *“You are a new*

author.” *“This work is not a good fit for us.”* Each 'no' was a small, sharp cut, carving away a piece of my hope.

The hardest part was dinner. My mother would look at me, that unwavering hope still swimming in her eyes, and ask, *“Any news, son?”*

My voice would tremble. *“Don't worry, Mom. We're getting close.”* I couldn't tell her the truth, but I know she saw the lie. A mother always knows.

On January 3rd, 2025, the world turned grey. Her health, already weakened by the long shadow of COVID, collapsed. In the sterile chill of the hospital, with every breath a mountain she had to climb, she asked me again about the book. Tears burned behind my eyes as I held her frail hand and told her the biggest lie of my life.

“They said yes, Mom,” I whispered, my voice cracking. *“They're going to publish it.”*

A flicker of peace crossed her face, a final, beautiful light. It was the last gift I could give her, a gentle lie to soften her final journey. On January 13th, 2025, she left me, holding onto a promise that was still just a dream.

Their absence isn't just loss; it's amputation. The virus didn't just take my loved ones; it stole my future, my past, the very air I breathe. The rejections from publishers now felt like insults to their memory. The waiting became unbearable. I couldn't stand to lose her final wish in the silence. I couldn't wait any longer for a traditional publisher who might never see the heart in these pages. I contacted Blue Rose Publishers, a self-publishing company, and they agreed.

This book is my cry, my scream into the void, a promise written in blood and tears to never let the world forget the heroes who walked among us—my father, my mother, my uncle, my

beautiful family. It is for them, and for every soul we lost in the darkness.

It is the weight of a promise I will carry for the rest of my life.





The Shadow That Changed the World: COVID-19

In late 2019, a new and invisible enemy appeared: COVID-19. First emerging in Wuhan, China, this virus quickly spread across borders, changing life as we knew it. It exposed the fragility of our existence and reminded us that we are all connected. Lockdowns, quarantines, and social distancing soon became the new normal as governments struggled to contain the spread.

Beyond the numbers, COVID-19 brought countless stories of loss and heartache. Families were separated, hospitals overwhelmed, and economies crippled. Yet, in the midst of despair, stories of courage, resilience, and kindness began to shine—ordinary people doing extraordinary things to care for one another.





The Unseen Heroes: When Ordinary Became Extraordinary

These are not fairy tales. These are real people, real pain, real courage.

You will meet those who:

- Ran toward danger when others ran away.
- Held the hands of the dying when even their own families were too afraid to touch them.
- Gave their last breath trying to save someone else's.

Their sacrifices were not in headlines. Their names will not be in history books. But they were giants, and they must be remembered.





Note from the Author

Most of The photographs in this book come primarily from news reports and social media. In those urgent days, stopping to capture moments felt impossible – we were racing against time to save lives. I never imagined documenting our journey; we were too immersed in surviving it.

The Golden Team faced unrelenting storms, heartbreak, and impossible roadblocks. Yet hope remained our compass. Every story you’ll read is etched in truth – fragments of laughter in darkness, quiet victories that sustained us, and unseen acts of humanity that defined our mission.

While these events are real, I’ve shaped them with narrative care—crafting a creative, cinematic non-fiction narrative so you not only read the truth but also feel it and see it from the eyes of your heart. My goal isn’t just to inform you — it’s to pull you into the heartbeat of our struggle. Behind each word stand ordinary people who summoned extraordinary courage.

You’ll notice three names for our leader:

- **“Mr. Rehan Golden”** marks public honor,
- **“Mr. Golden”** reflects earned respect (not a surname),
- **“Rehan”** or **“Uncle”** reveals personal bonds forged in crisis.

This isn’t inconsistency – it’s cultural resonance. In our world, formal titles carry reverence for leadership, while first names

or familial terms like *Uncle* signify profound trust. This duality mirrors Rehan himself: a revered hero to the public, a brother to those in the trenches.

A note on perspective:

- **“I”**: Chapters where *I was physically present*. You stand beside me in the kitchen, the graveyard, the chaos – experiencing fear, doubt, and hope through my eyes.
- **Third-person (Rehan/others)**: Events where *I was not present*. Here, you witness history unfold objectively – seeing critical moments exactly as they happened, without my personal lens. This includes Rehan’s private decisions, team actions I learned of later, and pivotal scenes reconstructed from direct accounts.

You’ll always know your viewpoint:

- **“I”** = *My lived experience*.
- **Third-person** = *History unfolding as it happened*.

Lastly, a handful of names have been changed to protect privacy. Their courage remains unaltered.

Thank you for entering this story with us. Carry it forward – not as a record of pain, but as proof of what humanity can ignite when darkness falls.





About the Author

I was a corrosion engineer. Steel and strategy were my language—chess championships, the clean logic of numbers. My world was built on precision, on fixing what was broken.

Then the pandemic came, and my universe burned.

In 2022, I walked away from my career, my safety, my old life—because some stories refuse to stay silent. Some souls scream to be heard.

For three years, I bled these words onto paper. This is not just writing. It is my memorial. My rebellion against forgetting.

If these pages make you feel even a fraction of what we felt—if they remind you that kindness still flickers in the darkest nights—then perhaps the light of those we lost will never truly fade.

This is my truth. This is their legacy.



Part I: The Storm Gathers



1. Bhopal in My Veins, UAE on My Skin: The January 27 Storm

Bhopal—my city, my heartbeat. Your name is a soft whisper on my lips, a song my heart never stops singing. Even far away, my soul walks your busy streets. When I close my eyes, I'm home.

The old city hums with life—*kebabs* sizzle on hot grills, the spicy scent of *biryani* (fragrant rice dish) wraps me like a warm hug. The new city glitters, golden plates of *chole bhature* (spicy chickpeas and fried bread) tempting me. Shahpura Lake rests quietly, its water holding the sky like a secret. On VIP Road, Raja Bhoj's statue stands tall, guarding the city's dreams like a silent king.

Every corner bursts with joy—children laugh while playing cricket, shopkeepers shout hellos like family. Bhopal isn't just dots on a map. It's a feeling, deep and warm, beating inside me like my own heart. And that feeling had a name: home.

But then... the dream fades. Refineries return, the sun burns my skin, and engineers from distant lands walk around. I close my eyes again and see a new vision—a grand school, glowing with hope, meant for everyone, rich or poor, waiting to rise. When I open them, both worlds vanish. Which is real—the one I see, or the one I feel?

Home feels like a star I can't touch. Here in the UAE, my days begin before dawn. As a Quality Control Officer, I walk

through blazing heat, checking pipelines under a harsh sun. The desert lies silent, but my thoughts always fly back—to my mother’s embrace, friends who are family, meals filled with laughter.

Homesickness isn’t just sadness—it’s a weight crushing my chest, heavier with each sunrise. A pain that never fades.

Then came the morning that changed everything.

Santosh Sir’s voice buzzed during a meeting about storage tanks—their role in the project. I nodded, but my mind counted days until my vacation. Soon, I’d hold my newborn son, see my parents’ tears of joy, feel friends’ tight hugs. But life had other plans.

During a routine check, my heart stopped. Parts of the pipeline linked to the tanks hadn’t been coated with rust-proof material. Without it, the pipes would rot within months—putting ADNOC’s million-dollar project at risk.

Panic exploded in our small team. Only three of us could fix it, and ADNOC’s client would arrive at 2 PM sharp. Time vanished like sand in the wind.

Then—a desperate idea.

I made a quick call, and a cake arrived. When the client walked in, we greeted him with calm faces, hiding our fear.

“Sir,” I said, forcing my voice steady, “*today’s a teammate’s birthday. Would you honor us by celebrating?*”

His smile saved us.

As we cut the cake, we shared fake stories—sweet lies to buy time. Every kind word gave us a minute more. The trick worked. We stole an extra hour.

Then, a message: *The work’s done.*

My relief faded when the client said he'd return at 5 PM for another check. My heart raced until we passed.

Later, driving back with Santosh Sir, I told him everything. He laughed. *"If he'd told you earlier about 5 PM, you'd have saved 70 dirhams on that cake—and an hour of fake smiles!"*

I slumped in my seat, eyes closed, as the radio crackled with static—a fuzzy news report about a strange new virus called "corona" in China. I turned it off. Just another headline I ignored.

By 7 PM, I stumbled into my villa, exhausted. But one video call fixed it all.

My family's faces glowed on the screen—my son's tiny fingers waving, my parents' shining eyes, friends laughing like old times. For one hour, tiredness vanished. I felt alive. Though unspoken, my heart whispered: *Soon. I'll be home soon.*

January 27, 2020. The date burned in my mind—a bright promise of joy.

I didn't know it would mark the start of a storm none of us saw coming.





2. Homecoming Joy: The Calm Before the Storm

The moment my feet touched Bhopal's soil on January 27, 2020, the air wrapped around me like a familiar hug—warm, fragrant with jasmine and dust. Sunlight glowed gold over the city, and sparrows chirped as if the world hadn't changed. Far off in Kerala, India's first COVID-19 case had been reported, but here, it felt like a distant rumor. Today was for family. For love. For the arms I'd ached to feel around me again.

My hands trembled as I dialed my brother. "*I'm home,*" I whispered.

Forty minutes later, the house roared with life: uncles arguing over cricket scores, aunts clattering plates in the kitchen, and cousins shrieking my name. My mother's tears wet my shoulder as she clung to me. "*My son,*" she kept saying, her voice breaking. My little cousin tugged at my sleeve, shouting, "*Tell us Dubai stories!*" Even as I laughed, my eyes searched the room. Someone was missing.

That evening, I stood on the balcony, phone pressed to my ear. Fahim—my cousin, my first friend—answered on the first ring. "*Upper Lake,*" I said before he could speak. "*Bring the others. Please.*"

Upper Lake. Our childhood sanctuary. The water mirrored the sky, mountains stood like watchful giants, and the same neem

trees rustled with our childhood secrets. Here, we'd sworn to be brothers forever.

They arrived one by one. Saad, Javed, Salman, Tarik Ahmed, Sudeep—their backs were turned as they argued about a cricket match. My heart thudded as I crept closer. Then, softly: "*Kya chal raha hai, dosto?*" (What's up, guys?)

Salman froze. Turned. His eyes widened. "*YA ALLAH!*" he screamed, crashing into me. Saad lunged next, nearly knocking us into the lake. "*You idiot!*" he laughed, punching my arm. Sudeep hung back, smirking. "*Took you one year?*" he said, but his hug lasted the longest.

The old couple on the bench chuckled. The breeze carried our laughter over the water. Saad's braying laugh, Salman's endless jokes, Sudeep's quiet grin—I'd forgotten how whole they made me feel.

The Days That Followed: A Tapestry of Love

Mornings tasted like Mom's parathas (flaky flatbreads), crispy and buttery. Afternoons buzzed with aunts scolding ("*Eat more!*") and uncles debating politics. But nights? Nights smelled of chai (tea) and samosas (fried pastries) at our rusty tea stall near Vardan Bus Stand.

The stall hadn't changed: cracked plastic chairs, the persistent smell of frying oil, and the uncle we had nicknamed "Samosa Uncle" in childhood—older and slower now, but still grinning as he handed us plates.

"Remember?" Saad whispered. "*We'd beg, 'Samosa Uncle, paise kal denge!'*" (We'll pay tomorrow!)

I grinned. At fifteen, we'd sneak here, pockets empty. Samosa Uncle would roll his eyes. "*Kal dena,*" (Pay tomorrow) he'd say, sliding us free samosas. He never asked for the money.

Now, Javed leaned back, licking chili sauce off his thumb. *"That time we skipped school to watch Tere Naam..."*

"And got caught!" Saad snorted.

Sudeep flushed. *"You said the principal was away!"*

Then Javed shifted gears. *"And remember when you set the chem lab on fire?"*

"The teacher said to mix chemicals, not read the instructions!" Sudeep muttered.

We laughed loudly, holding our stomachs. Around us, the city was alive—scooters rattling, sellers calling out, and the cold January air making our faces tingle. Sitting on ITH Café's old stone steps, drinking hot chai, I saw our breath turn into little clouds. The gentle winter sun glowed above us, and our joy felt warmer than the chill. *This*, I thought. *This is why I came back.*

When the Rain Whispered Warnings: The Omen We Missed

Rain hit suddenly one evening, hissing into our chai.

"Strange for February," I said, watching drops ripple in my cup.

Salman smirked. *"Maybe God's bored. Saw Rahul Gandhi's tweet? Some virus in China called Corona?"*

Saad snorted. *"Remember praying for plagues to skip exams? Imagine if this works!"*

Sudeep sipped his tea. *"I prayed once. Failed anyway. Dad's stick left marks for weeks."*

Hearing them talk about a plague, even jokingly—especially after all the news I'd heard back in Dubai—sent a shiver down my spine. *"Careful what you wish for,"* I muttered, trying to sound lighthearted. *"Let's hope nothing bad happens."*

Sudeep bumped my shoulder. *“Relax. Focus on your dream project—the ‘World Best School of Hope for Everyone’.”*

I struck a mock-serious pose, gesturing like a professor. *“My dream school? Multilingual mastery, friends! Early career shaping—doctor, engineer, scientist, commerce... all paths open! Imagine mind-architects nurturing unshakable belief, and skill-alchemy to break boundaries. Every child—a universe of limitless might!”*

Sudeep clutched his chest dramatically, mimicking my tone. *“Oh no, not the mind-architects speech again! ‘Skill-alchemy to break boundaries’? ‘Child of limitless might’? Arre (Hey), we’ve heard this a million times since we were little kids!”* He flopped onto the muddy ground, grinning. *“Stop frying our brains with your fancy words! Soon there’ll be nothing left inside!”* He poked a squashed samosa. *“Even this has more filling than our heads now! Let us eat samosas in peace!”*

We howled with laughter, the rain mixing with our tears. Even the thunder seemed to laugh with us. But as the sky darkened, Sudeep’s grin softened. *“Fine, fine,”* he said, tossing a soggy samosa piece at me. *“Your ‘magic school’ sounds nice. But this—”* He pointed at our drenched group, huddled under a wobbly umbrella, *“—this is better. No ‘alchemy’ needed.”*

We didn’t know.

This was the last night we’d argue about samosa bites instead of adult things.

The last time Sudeep’s silly voices would make us forget the cold.

But right then? We were unstoppable.

The flickering streetlights turned Sudeep’s dramatic poses into shadow-puppet shows. We chanted his mocking *“mind-*

architeeeeeects!” until our throats hurt, our laughter stitching us together tighter than any “skill-alchemy” ever could.

The storm waited.

And for once, so did time.

Even as the world began to shift beneath our feet. **Soon, we would face struggles that tested not just our bond, but the very core of who we were.**





3. A Cup of Tea and a Heart Torn Apart: The World Stopped

The whispers began softly, like winter fog creeping through our city streets. At first, it was just a word—*Corona*—something happening to people in faraway places we'd never seen. But then, like a shadow stretching at dusk, it grew darker, closer, until it touched everyone. The news buzzed with stories of patients, of fear, of a sickness no one understood. A chill settled over Bhopal that no sunlight could warm.

I remember those last ordinary days like a dream. We sat at our usual spot near Vardan Bus Stand Café, steam curling from our teacups, laughter ringing like bells in the air. Just a stone's throw away stood Charak Hospital, though none of us noticed then. For those precious hours, we were just friends—untouched, unafraid, wrapped in the golden glow of togetherness.

Then Sudeep's voice cut through our joy.

"Isn't that Priya? By the medical store—crying?" He squinted into the distance. *"It looks like her!"*

We turned, shielding our eyes against the fading light, but the store stood just too far to be sure.

"Can't be," someone said, waving it off. Priya was supposed to be preparing for her big move to the UK, chasing her father's dream of her studying at Oxford. She was the brightest of us—determined, fearless, her father's pride.

As we turned back to our *chai* (tea), Saad brought up our last school reunion—the one I’d missed while working in the UAE. He told me how Priya had sparkled that night, talking about her DPhil, how her father had taken out loans to make it happen. She was his only child, his whole world.

“What’s a DPhil?” Sudeep blurted, scrunching his face. “I only know dolphins!”

We burst into laughter, the sound light and carefree—until Javed came sprinting back from the juice shop, his face pale.

“That is Priya. And she’s sobbing.”

Silence.

A silent look passed between us. Our laughter died in our throats. In seconds, we were running toward the hospital, hearts pounding like drums. Priya wasn’t just a classmate—she was family. And there she was, crumpled at the hospital entrance, her eyes red, her face hollow. She looked like a ghost of the girl we knew.

“Priya... what’s wrong?” I asked, my voice barely steady.

She opened her mouth, but only a broken whimper escaped. Finally, between ragged breaths, she whispered:

“It’s my dad... He got sick two weeks ago. We thought it was just a cold, but... he couldn’t breathe. Tonight, he—he collapsed.”

The air left my lungs. The man we remembered—always laughing, his eyes crinkling with warmth—was fighting for every breath behind those sterile walls.

“They took him straight to the ICU,” she choked out.

We stared at each other, helpless. There were no words. So we did the only thing we could—we stayed.

Hours dragged in that waiting room, the beeping of machines a cruel reminder of time slipping away. Priya's tears fell silently, and we held her, whispering empty comforts because silence was worse.

Then—a scream.

A sound so raw, so shattered, it tore through the hospital's quiet. We bolted toward the ICU. It was Priya's mother, her voice breaking like glass. Priya lunged for the door, but a nurse stopped her.

"Only one person can go in."

Priya shook in our arms, her cries muffled against my shoulder. We held her tighter, murmuring *"It'll be okay"*—a lie we all knew but couldn't stop saying.

Then her mother stepped out.

Her face was blank. Her eyes—empty.

She collapsed into Priya's arms.

"He's gone," she whispered. *"Your father is gone."*

Priya's wail shattered the air—a sound I will hear until the day I die. We clung to her, to her mother, our own tears falling like rain. We had lost a man who felt like our own, and no words could fill the hole he left behind.

We stayed until dawn, holding Priya through the longest night of her life. We couldn't take her pain, but we could share it. And in the days that followed, that's what we did.

That night changed everything. It showed us how fragile life is—how a single breath can be the difference between before and after. Priya's father had given everything for her future, and fate had stolen him just as it was within reach.

We never got official confirmation it was Corona. The first recorded death in Bhopal wasn't until April 6th—Priya's father left us in early March. But in our hearts, we knew. Sometimes, the real stories aren't in the numbers. They're in the tears, the empty chairs, the dreams cut short.

For us, that was the day Corona stopped being a headline.

It became the monster that took someone we loved.

And nothing was ever the same again.





4. A Dying Father, A Loyal Boss... Then the Graveyard Called

On the evening of March 17, 2020, Amir stood outside the ICU doors of Hamidia Hospital, his heart breaking with each passing minute. Tears streamed down his face as he watched doctors come and go, silently begging each one for good news with his eyes. The hospital walls seemed to close in around him, making it hard to breathe.

His phone buzzed. The name on the screen—*Mr. Rehan Golden*—sparked a tiny flame of hope. Rehan was the chairman of Jhada Graveyard, the largest in Madhya Pradesh, where Amir worked as head of the graveyard team. With his father's condition worsening, Amir had been expecting this call.

His trembling fingers answered. "*Amir beta (son), how is your father's health?*" Rehan's voice carried a warmth that reached through the phone and wrapped around Amir's breaking heart.

"*They're doing their best,*" Amir replied, his voice cracking. "*But... his condition keeps getting worse.*" The dam broke then, tears flowing freely as words failed him.

After a moment of silence, Rehan spoke again, his voice steady like an anchor in a storm. "*Amir, don't lose hope. Allah is with us. I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Stay strong, beta (son).*"

As promised, Rehan arrived, his presence almost larger than life. Tall and healthy, he carried an aura of quiet strength.

Dressed in his usual white *kurta pajama* (traditional long shirt and loose pants) and an Arabic scarf draped around his shoulders, he looked like a man who bore the weight of a thousand battles, yet still had the strength to fight one more. Without speaking, he embraced Amir, whispering, *"We'll get through this."* Those simple words somehow steadied Amir's racing heart.

They sat together through the endless night. The hallway echoed with beeping monitors and the whispered prayers of other families clinging to hope. When doctors emerged with prescriptions for urgent medications, Amir ran to the pharmacy, hands shaking as he counted out money, then raced back, clutching the medicine like it might save more than just his father's life.

Though the graveyard awaited him in the morning, Rehan stayed. When Amir insisted he should leave, Rehan simply shook his head. *"Amir, right now, this is where I need to be."*

Hours crawled by. Amir's body ached with exhaustion, but Rehan's presence kept him upright when his own strength failed. Finally, a doctor emerged with news that his father had stabilized. Amir nearly collapsed with relief, tears of gratitude streaming down his face.

They left as the first light of dawn broke across the sky. *"We need food,"* Rehan said gently, leading them to a small roadside restaurant where they ordered bread and omelets. As they waited, Rehan's phone rang. After listening briefly, he looked at Amir with apologetic eyes. *"I have to go to the graveyard. A body has just arrived."*

"Rehan sir," Amir said, concern etched in his tired face, *"at least have your breakfast. I can go in your place."*

Rehan squeezed Amir's shoulder, his eyes filled with quiet determination. *"No, Amir. This is my responsibility. You eat and rest. You've had a long night."*

After Rehan left, Amir stared at the untouched food, unable to swallow past the lump in his throat. He took the plates outside and gave them to a beggar sitting nearby. Watching the man eat brought him a fleeting moment of peace before urgency took over again. Despite his exhaustion, he needed to be at the graveyard where Rehan worked.

He arrived to find Rehan filling out paperwork, face solemn but focused. This man who had stayed awake all night was still carrying out his duties without complaint. Amir stood beside him, eyes red and swollen. When colleagues tried to comfort him, he shook his head.

"My father's condition..." His voice broke. "It's not getting better." They urged him to rest, but he glanced toward Rehan. "Chairman Rehan stayed with me all night. How can I go home when he's here, working without rest?"

That day, four bodies arrived, each one a story of loss. By evening, when they finally ate their first meal at 7 p.m., they were both beyond exhaustion—their bodies weary but spirits unbroken. Their shared purpose had become their comfort, a reminder that even in darkness, they could offer dignity to others.

The 45 Minutes That Broke Amir's World

Two days later, his father's condition worsened. On the morning of March 21, after another sleepless night at the hospital, Amir finally returned home at 8 a.m., collapsing onto his bed. As sleep began to claim him, memories flooded in—sitting on the porch as a small boy, waiting for his father to return from work with paper bags of warm *samosas* (fried

pastries). He remembered his father staying up all night when he had fevers, helping with homework, being his constant hero who never showed weakness.

Tears slipped from beneath his closed eyelids as he whispered a prayer. He promised himself he would return to the hospital later—just as his father had always been there for him.

Just 45 minutes later, his phone rang, shattering the brief peace. His brother's trembling voice cut through his exhaustion:

"Amir, father's condition is getting worse."

The world tilted. Fighting crushing fatigue, Amir splashed water on his face and rushed back to the hospital. This time, the doctor's face held no hope.

"You should inform your relatives," the doctor said, each word striking like a physical blow.

Amir's vision darkened at the edges. The room spun, and then—nothing. He vaguely remembered the steadying pressure of Rehan's hand on his arm and the sorrowful, silent drive.

When he opened his eyes again, he was home, surrounded by the wails of his family. Disoriented, he struggled to his feet. A strange, hollow laugh escaped his lips as he sank to the floor, his mind refusing to accept what his heart already knew.

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder. Rehan Golden stood beside him, his face etched with a sorrow that mirrored Amir's own.

"Amir," Rehan said gently, "your father has passed away."

The laughter died in Amir's throat. His eyes traveled to a corner of the room where his father lay wrapped in white cloth. Reality crashed down, leaving him with a grief so profound it stole his breath. He knelt beside his father, hands trembling as he reached out, his heart breaking into pieces no one could ever put back together.

In that moment of unbearable loss, Rehan knelt beside him. Together they grieved—not just for Amir’s father, but for all those they had laid to rest before, and for those they knew would follow in the dark days to come.





5. No Money, No Matter: The Debt Beyond Repayment

My friends and I had just come back from an amazing five-day trip to Pachmarhi. The days were filled with breathtaking views, and nights echoed with warm laughter. We reached Bhopal around 10 PM—tired but happy, our hearts still dancing with the memories of our journey.

As we drove past the familiar Vardan Bus Stop, something unusual made us slow down. There, on the roadside, **stood *Chacha's*** samosa trolley—empty and forlorn. An old woman, her face etched with quiet sorrow and fatigue, struggled to pull it along.

“Wait... is that *Chacha's* trolley?” Javed asked, his eyes wide with disbelief as he leaned toward the window.

“Yeah, but... where is *Chacha*?” I murmured, worry threading through my voice.

“Should we stop?” Saad suggested, gently easing the car to a halt.

We stepped out into the cool night, our steps heavy with concern. As we drew near, the old woman looked up, her eyes soft with sadness. I approached her slowly and asked in a gentle tone, “Ma’am, is everything okay? Where’s *Chacha*?”

Her eyes glistened with tears as she sighed deeply. With a trembling voice, she replied: “I am *Chacha*’s wife. He passed away two days ago.”

Her words fell like heavy stones in the quiet night.

Javed’s voice dropped to a near whisper: “What? *Chacha* is gone?”

The old woman nodded, her hand shaking as she dabbed at a tear.

“He had trouble breathing. We couldn’t afford a hospital, so he tried to treat himself with some medicine from a local shop. But in the end, his body could not fight anymore. Two days ago, he took his last breath.”

The news sank in slowly. We all remembered *Chacha*—the friendly face who greeted us each day with a warm smile and a gentle promise. As memories stirred, Salman, who had been listening quietly, said with a wistful smile: “I remember him saying, ‘No money, no issue, pay tomorrow.’ Even in hard times, he made us feel hopeful.”

I whispered softly: “We used to come here all the time.”

Javed added: “He was always there. Even when we were in school, he’d give us samosas.” His eyes shone with fond remembrance.

Saad, usually so calm, rubbed his face as if trying to wipe away the shock. In a quiet, shaky voice, he murmured: “We were laughing just moments ago, thinking everything was fine... and now it feels like a cruel dream.” His eyes glistened with unshed tears, each word heavy with sorrow.

The old woman, with a faint, sad smile, nodded slowly: “That was him.”

We stood there in silence, the empty trolley a silent testament to a life now lost. What began as a night of joy had turned into a stark reminder of life's fragility.



Chacha's Ghost: A Pandemic Wake-Up Call

The drive home was quiet. No one spoke. Even the radio, usually blaring Bollywood hits, stayed silent. When I finally collapsed into bed, sleep didn't come. The empty trolley and the old woman's tears played on a loop in my mind. *First Priya's father, now Chacha.* The pandemic was no longer a distant threat—it was stealing the people who made our world feel safe.

Around 4 AM, exhaustion dragged me into a restless sleep. I dreamed of Chacha's smile, his voice calling out, "*Kal dena!*" (Pay tomorrow!) as he handed us steaming samosas.

A few hours later, at 7 AM on **March 24, 2020**, my phone rang. It was Fahim, his tone urgent and edged with panic.

"Do you know there's a corona-positive case in Bhopal?" he blurted out.

Still half-awake, I groaned and replied in a tired, dull voice: *"So what? We've been hearing this from everywhere—from Priya's father to our own Chacha, the samosa seller. Let me sleep, yaar (friend). I'm tired of hearing 'corona, corona' all the time."*

In that moment, the world felt unsteady. People were caught between fear and disbelief—some truly scared, others dismissing it as a rumor. The constant flood of bad news left us confused and drained. Meeting Chacha's wife and feeling so

helpless made us realize that this crisis was measured not in numbers, but in the small, precious lives we cherished.

Later that evening, at 8 PM on **March 24, 2020**, Prime Minister Modi announced a nationwide lockdown to begin the next day. In that single moment, everything shifted. The lively streets of Bhopal were destined to fall silent, as we all braced ourselves for the unknown days ahead.

That night, as I lay awake once more, the ghost of Chacha's warm smile and the empty samosa trolley lingered in my thoughts—a powerful symbol of loss and a reminder of the deep scars left by a pandemic that touched us all.





6. Silent Streets and Shattered Lives: India's First Lockdown

The Night Everything Stopped March 24th, 2020. My family sat close together, the TV glowing. I could still see samosa uncle's smile in my mind. Then the Prime Minister appeared. His words hit us like a hammer: the whole country was shutting down. **In just four hours.**

The shock was huge. It wasn't just our house; the whole nation froze. That quiet fear we all felt? Suddenly, it was real. The danger wasn't coming anymore. **It was here.**

The World Went Quiet

Within hours, everyone rushed out, desperate for supplies. But when night fell, a silence I'd never heard swallowed my city, Bhopal. Just days before, these streets were alive – full of shouting sellers and buzzing auto-rickshaws. Now? **Nothing. Empty. Like a ghost town.**

The Long Walk Home

Our quiet city felt wrong next to the noise on our TV. Our living room showed a national nightmare. Millions of workers, suddenly with no job and no home, started walking. **Walking back to their villages.** They walked under the burning sun, hungry, thirsty, carrying their children. They called it the biggest movement of people since 1947. All I saw was a river of pain, a line of broken hearts, crossing India.

Pain Everywhere

We felt so powerless. Every picture hurt: buses and trains jammed full, perfect for spreading the sickness; families sleeping under bridges, their faces tight with the same fear growing inside me. This wasn't just a sickness. **It was a wave of human suffering.**

The Poorest Suffered Most

As always, the people with the least lost the most. The workers who built our city day by day, the small shop owners... their money vanished overnight. Prices shot up. No savings. A new fear spread faster than the virus: **hunger**. You could feel the hope draining away, replaced by a heavy, scary unknown.

Tracks of Tears

Later, numbers proved what we saw in their eyes: **8,733 people died on the train tracks in 2020**. Most were workers trying to get home. That number isn't just a figure. It's 8,733 hearts stopped. 8,733 families broken. 8,733 worlds of pain.

A Nation's Pain... and Strength

The lockdown was a terrible storm we had to face. It caused so much hurt. But in that deep darkness, **small lights appeared**. We heard stories – countless ordinary people helping strangers. Giving food. Giving water. Giving shelter. It showed India's true heart: **Even when broken, we refused to let each other fall**. The hardest part was only just beginning.



Part II: The Rise of the Golden Team



7. Light in the Darkness: When Hope Refused to Die

THe lockdown had barely begun when the real crisis revealed itself. While the world trembled before the invisible virus, in the narrow lanes of Jahangirabad (a historic neighborhood in Bhopal), another killer stalked the people—hunger. Empty stomachs growled louder than fear of disease. Desperate eyes told stories no newspaper would print.

Inside Rehan Golden's small office, the air tasted of dust and worry. Sunlight fought through grimy windows, cutting sharp lines on the floor. His brothers—Irshad, Anwar, and Irfan—stood by the window, where the light split the gloom. On the worn wooden table sat Rehan's nephews—Aadil, Anas, Arib—and me, Faiz. A few key team members, Mr. Farooq and Abid, huddled near the door, their faces drawn tight. A single overhead bulb flickered, like a fading heartbeat, making every shadow tremble.

Rehan ran a hand through his hair, his fingers shaking. He leaned forward, his voice low and raw.

“People are dying from treatable illnesses because hospitals demand COVID tests,” he said. His fist thumped the table, a sudden crack in the heavy quiet, rattling a chipped mug. “Three days for results—three days when a mother bleeds out or a child's fever boils over.”

A tight silence followed, broken only by the hum of the old fan. The sound felt too loud. I caught Rehan's eye and saw fear there—an unspoken question: *Can we really do this?*

The memory of the old woman from Jahangirabad haunted us all; her body wasted from diarrhea, turned away again and again until a negative COVID report came too late. Her face hung in the dusty air between us.

Irshad Ahmed, the quiet elder, broke the silence, his words falling like gentle rain on parched soil. "We cannot watch this happen. People need doctors who will come to them, without fear, without impossible bills."

"A home-visit doctor?" Mr. Farooq suggested hesitantly.

"Doctors are too afraid to step outside now," Anas said, shaking his head.

Aadil looked to his father for an answer. "How can we even try?"

I nodded in weary agreement. "With the lockdown, how would it even work?"

Then Irshad spoke, his voice soft but unbreakable, his eyes holding a deep wisdom. "Did anyone imagine this pandemic was possible? Yet here it is. It crashed through our doors like a storm. If problems can break the rules of impossibility, so must our solutions." He turned to us young men—Aadil, Anas, and me—his gaze sharp and clear. "Find us a doctor. This isn't about medicine. This is about humanity."

His next words settled in our bones like a divine command: "The greatest duty in the eyes of Allah is to serve humanity."

The silence that followed wasn't defeat. It was the quiet before a revolution, a spark waiting for kindling.

Then the door burst open, straining against the frame as the desperate faces of women filled the doorway, streaked with tears. Their sorrow was a thick fog in the small room. One clutched her hollow stomach, her voice a broken whisper: “The virus may kill us tomorrow, but hunger is murdering us today. Our children... they cry for food we cannot give.”

Irshad stood slowly, rising like a mountain against the grey sky. The flickering light seemed to gather around him. “Aadil,” he said, his voice calm and resolute, “go home. Bring raw and cooked food... all that we can. Now.”

Twenty minutes later, under a sky heavy with worry, a small miracle unfolded. Women walked away from our office clutching packets of rice, lentils, and chapatis like treasure, their tears now tracks of relief in the dust on their cheeks. Irshad turned to the room, a fire igniting in his eyes.

“We’re starting a free kitchen—because no one should sleep hungry. Not on our watch. Not while we draw breath. Every meal served is a stand against hunger.”

And so, on March 28, 2020, as the world shut down, a single flame was lit in a vast darkness. A kitchen opened. It served more than meals; it served hope on steel plates and in brown paper packets—toast and tea at dawn, warm lunches at noon, dinners delivered with dignity. Each steaming plate whispered a promise: *You are not forgotten.*

Late that night, after the last dinners were delivered, Rehan looked at his brother, his own eyes shimmering. A lifetime of trust shone in that look.

“We fed hope tonight, Bhai,” he began, his voice thick with emotion. “You’ve always been my compass. Promise me you’ll never stop guiding me.”

Irshad didn't answer with words. The room held its breath. He simply placed his calloused hand on Rehan's shoulder—a touch as strong as roots. His smile—quiet, humble, and endless—said everything. In that gesture flowed generations of love, an unspoken vow: *As long as I breathe, you will never be lost.*

And in that quiet moment, a truth settled over us: the darkest nights are always pierced by stars. Some shine from the heavens. Others walk among us, wearing the faces of brothers. Their light is the kind that saves us.

Note-: And I want to be clear—this kitchen began and has always continued without a single donation. It was started solely through the personal expenses of Mr. Rehan Golden and his family. The first light in a long, long night.



Just days after the lockdown began, Rehan Golden and his family launched the "Golden Kitchen," a self-funded initiative that soon gained citywide attention. News channels and newspapers covered its impact, with RH 24 capturing a powerful image of grateful people lining up for food parcels.



An RH 24 photo captures the Golden Kitchen's dedication, featuring Hamza's inspiring interview. Through the pandemic, it stood as a symbol of hope until normalcy returned.





8. When Bhopal Refused Its Dead: The Lone Warrior's Stand Against Fear

In early April 2020, Bhopal stood on the brink of a heartbreaking crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic was claiming lives, and bodies were arriving at graveyards for burial. But the graveyard workers—the quiet guardians of these final rites—found themselves defenseless: no protective gear, no masks, no safety equipment. Fear hung thick in the air as each worker felt the growing danger. Yet, amidst this fear, one man refused to remain silent. Rehan Golden, his eyes filled with determination, became the first in the city to stand up and fight for the safety of these unsung heroes—the graveyard and cremation workers.

Rehan's plea didn't just echo through empty streets—it reached the ears of the Bhopal Collector and the city commissioner. An urgent meeting was called. Inside that room sat the powerful chairmen of all the graveyards in Bhopal. The mission was clear: a decision had to be made on where COVID-19 victims could be buried and how to ensure the workers received the protection they so desperately needed.

But fear had already gripped the hearts of the men in that room. One after another, the chairmen voiced their refusals. *"We cannot risk our lives, or the lives of our teams,"* they said, their voices trembling. *"If we allow these bodies to be buried in our*

graveyards, we put ourselves, our families, and our communities in danger." The rejection was unanimous.

It felt as though Bhopal was teetering on the edge of a tragedy—a city unwilling to give its dead the dignity they deserved, held captive by fear.

Suddenly, a voice rose from the tension-filled silence. Strong, resolute, and unshaken by fear—it was Rehan Golden. He stood tall, his words cutting through the hesitation and dread that filled the room. *"This is inhumane and unacceptable,"* he declared, his voice laced with both compassion and righteous anger. *"This virus may take the life from the body, but your refusal will steal the peace from the souls of their loved ones. We cannot abandon our duty, especially now, when it's needed most."*

But even as his words rang with truth, the room remained still. No one wanted to take the risk. The silence felt almost suffocating, as if fear had choked the humanity out of the room. Yet, Rehan Golden remained unwavering.

With courage burning within him, Rehan made a decision that would forever mark his place in history. Alone, against the tide of fear, he stepped forward and ensured that the Jhada Graveyard—the largest in Madhya Pradesh—would be the one place in Bhopal where COVID-19 victims could be laid to rest with dignity. It was an act of extraordinary bravery, a defiant stand for humanity in a time when fear had all but silenced hope.

In those dark and uncertain days of the pandemic, when hope seemed distant and fear reigned supreme, Rehan Golden lit a beacon of courage. He showed the world that true heroism is not the absence of fear, but the strength to act despite it. Through his unwavering resolve, he gave Bhopal something it desperately needed—a leader, a protector, a hero.

By the light of his bravery, the dead were given peace, and the living were reminded that even in the darkest moments, **humanity must prevail.**





9. The Kitchen That Cared: Organizing for a Cause, Finding Medical Heroes

Our kitchen hummed with life—spoons clanging against pots, voices rising and falling, the sharp scent of onions filling the air. In this small space, something powerful was taking root in our hearts. Those early days were far from perfect. We crowded around the counter, six or seven of us slicing vegetables with more eagerness than skill, while four others pressed dough into uneven rotis (flatbreads).

Morning tea duty rotated among us. We worked hard, but anyone could see we lacked order.

One afternoon, time slipped through our fingers like water. The lunch that should have been ready by 2:00 PM stretched on until 6:00 PM. Sweat beaded on foreheads as we worked, shoulders drooping with fatigue. That's when Mr. Irshad Ahmed appeared in the doorway. He watched us for a moment, his weathered face taking in the scene—the scattered ingredients, the exhausted volunteers, the meal still unfinished. His eyes showed concern, but his smile remained kind.

After we finally delivered the last packet that evening, he called us together. Our group had grown to over twenty by then—ordinary people inspired by the courage of Mr. Rehan Golden and Irshad himself. Each day brought new faces, all wanting to

help. And with each new volunteer came more people depending on us for their next meal, their slice of hope.

Irshad stood before us, his dignified demeanor somehow filling the room. When he spoke, the kitchen fell silent.

“You’re all doing amazing work,” he said, his voice gentle but clear as a bell. *“We are here because we believe that serving humanity is the greatest duty in the eyes of Allah. Isn’t that so?”*

“Yes, sir!” we answered, our tired faces brightening.

“But my friends,” he continued, *“if we want to meet this growing need, we must become organized. Let’s break into smaller teams with clear tasks. This way, we can help more people without burning ourselves out.”*

We nodded, feeling the truth of his words settle deep within us. Then he turned to me—Faiz—and then to Aadil and Anas, his gaze direct but never harsh.

“And you three,” he said. *“What news about finding a doctor who can visit the sick at home?”*

I stole a quick glance at them before answering, feeling the weight of our failed attempts.

“Abba (father),” I said, *“we’ve spoken to many doctors. Most are too afraid to enter homes right now. The few willing to come ask for money we simply don’t have.”*

Irshad nodded slowly, his eyes softening with understanding. He placed a hand on my shoulder, warm and steady.

“I understand, my son,” he said, his voice low. *“But remember—sometimes help arrives from the most unexpected places. Keep looking. We need someone who sees what we see, who believes what we believe.”*

His words washed over me like cool water. “*We’ll keep trying, Abba,*” I promised, feeling something stir inside me again.

True to his wisdom, the next days brought what we needed most. One by one, brave doctors stepped forward, agreeing to visit the sick without charge. Among them were: Dr. Rajesh Verma, with his quiet confidence; Dr. Ajmal Khan, whose laughter could ease any patient’s fears; Dr. Sunil Tiwari, who brought medicines from his own cabinet; Dr. Anil Bhargav, who couldn’t make home visits but sent supplies and advice that saved countless lives; and Mr. Rumman Ansari, the Managing Director of a Pathology and Diagnostic Center, who ensured all tests and diagnoses were conducted free of cost. These heroes and their service to humanity were beyond measure.

I remember watching Dr. Verma kneel beside an elderly man’s bed, checking his breathing with such gentleness that the man’s frightened family visibly relaxed. “*You’re not alone in this,*” he told them—words that echoed what Irshad had taught us all.

These doctors became the true heroes of our story. They didn’t just treat illness; they carried hope into homes where fear had taken root.

Day by day, our kitchen found its rhythm. The chaos gave way to purpose. Mornings began with tea and toast distribution, followed by preparing rotis (flatbreads), rice, and sabzi (vegetable curry) for lunch. The same routine continued into the evening, ensuring dinner was ready on time. Through every challenge, Irshad’s quiet wisdom guided us forward. His lessons went beyond organizing meals—he showed us that serving others wasn’t just about the food we made or the medicine we brought. It was about carrying light into dark places, about standing together when standing alone seemed easier.

In that simple kitchen, amid steam and spices and shared purpose, we found something none of us expected: a family bound not by blood but by compassion, **serving humanity one meal, one visit, one kindness at a time.**



DR. Anil Bhargav



DR. Rajesh Verma



DR. Sunil Tiwari



DR. Ajmal Khan





10. First COVID Body, Last Wheat Sack: Sacrifice and Compassion

The kitchen buzzed with energy as we worked together, chopping vegetables and washing dishes. Aadil, Adnan, Hamza, and I sliced through vegetables, each cut trying to slice away our worries too. Our hands stayed busy while our hearts carried the weight of so many who depended on us during these dark pandemic days.

Mr. Farooq burst through the door, his normally bright face clouded with worry. At 50, this fair-skinned man was more than our kitchen leader—he was our guardian, always thinking ahead, caring for everyone with a father’s heart. Today, his usual smile had vanished.

“We only have 500 kg of wheat flour left,” he said, his voice trembling. *“Not enough for tomorrow’s dinner or the day after’s lunch.”*

His words fell heavy between us. Aadil’s knife froze mid-air. *“Only 500 kg?”* Disbelief filled his voice. *“That’s barely three meals! What will we do?”*

My heart raced. Each meal needed 150–200 kg to feed thousands—the numbers swirled in my mind like a storm, trapping us in our dwindling reality.

Hamza sighed deeply. *“I checked with suppliers. Flour is either too expensive or gone. Prices climb by the hour.”* His

whispered words carried hopelessness, his eyes dimming with each syllable.

Cold silence wrapped around us like winter fog.

Then Irshad Ahmed—Aadil’s and my father, uncle to Hamza and Adnan, and respected Golden Team elder—stepped in. He’d been listening quietly. His warm hand found Aadil’s shoulder, bringing comfort with a single touch.

“Don’t worry, Aadil,” he said steadily. “We’ll use the wheat from our home.”

The room held its breath. Hamza’s eyes widened. Aadil turned to his father, face etched with concern. *“Our home stock?”* His voice shook. *“But, Abba, are you sure?”*

Irshad smiled gently, eyes burning with quiet determination. *“We can’t let people go hungry, Aadil. This is why we’re here. Allah has blessed us, and He will provide again. Our duty is to help now.”*

Emotion flooded my chest. This wasn’t just sharing—this was sacrificing our family’s safety net. Javed leaned close, whispering, *“Faiz, is this right? What if your families have nothing left?”*

I swallowed hard. *“I don’t know, Javed. But if our elders believe this path... maybe we should trust them.”*

Anwar Ahmed, Irshad’s younger brother, stepped forward with quiet confidence. *“I’ll get the flour,”* he said, already moving toward the door. His certainty sparked hope like the first match struck in darkness.

Fear still lingered despite our elders’ courage. What if everything ran out? What if the pandemic’s grip tightened beyond our strength? Hamza’s voice found me, small but reaching. *“Will we make it through this?”*

I met his worried eyes, sharing his doubt. *“I don’t know, Hamza. But our elders chose this path. They understand the cost.”*

As we carried wheat sacks from home to kitchen, something shifted inside me. Fear softened, replaced by something stronger—unity, purpose, belonging. We weren’t just making food; we were standing together against darkness, hand in hand.

We finished stacking the wheat as Rehan walked in, his face unreadable. *“What’s all this?”* he asked seriously. I explained quickly, and he listened in silence.

Pain flickered across his face. *“Next time, tell me immediately if supplies run this low,”* he said, calm but firm.

As we resumed our work, the room gradually brightened with small smiles and shared glances—tiny moments of light we created together. Then Sudeep’s voice rose softly in song, a gentle thread of melody weaving through our work.

“Yaaron, dosti badi hi haseen hai, Yeh na ho toh kya, phir bolo yeh zindagi hai.” (Oh friends, friendship is so beautiful; without it, what is life?)

His voice wasn’t perfect, but in that moment, it was everything we needed—a reminder of simpler days, of connection that outlasts hardship. His ’90s Hindi pop tune wrapped around us like a mother’s embrace, warming our tired souls.

The spell broke when Rehan’s phone rang. We fell silent, watching him answer. The color drained from his face. When he hung up, his voice came hushed but heavy:

“A COVID-positive body is coming to the graveyard tonight, around 10 or 11 PM. Until now, we’ve only handled suspected cases—but this... this is different.”

A chill rippled through me. The pandemic, always hovering at the edges of our lives despite all we'd seen, had finally stepped directly into our path.

Rehan's gaze hardened, his voice steady with resolve. *"This is our mission now,"* he said firmly. *"We can't back down."*

In that moment, standing among friends who had become family, watching elders whose faith never wavered, I felt fear—real and sharp. But I felt something stronger too: the unbreakable bonds between us. Whatever darkness came next, we would face it together, our joined hands creating enough light to see us through.



A memorable photograph captured during a broadcast on RH24 News shows the Golden Team distributing free food in hospitals, with Taaha on the left and Hamza on the right.





A Body Pulled by Rope, Wrapped in Plastic: The Moment Rehan Vowed to Protect Dignity

The air itself seemed to weigh a thousand pounds that evening. Rehan's family had just finished moving their precious wheat stock—their only shield against hunger—from their home to the Golden community kitchen. His muscles ached from the day's tension, but his mind was restless. Little did he know, the night would carve a wound so deep into his soul that it would redefine his purpose forever.

It was April 2020. The world had become a place of whispers and shadows. Fear clung to the streets like a suffocating fog. Then came the call—the first COVID-19 body in Jhada Graveyard. A woman. Zebunissa. From Nizamuddin Colony, Bhopal.

At 9:30 PM, Rehan arrived at the graveyard with Amir. His shoulders sagged under an invisible weight. His eyes, usually bright with determination, now swam with a sorrow too heavy to name. The two men spoke in hushed tones, their voices trembling. Zebunissa had died. Her family confirmed it was the virus.

The night stretched on, silent and hollow. The lockdown had stolen even the sound of the wind. Then—a low, mournful hum cut through the darkness. An ambulance.

Rehan's pulse quickened.

The doors creaked open. Two men stepped out—her son and her brother. Their movements were stiff, their hands shaking. Fear radiated from them like heat from a fire. And then, they did the unthinkable.

They pulled out a rope.

Wrapped in layers of suffocating plastic, like discarded cargo, was Zebunissa's body.

"I'm her son," one muttered, his voice cracking.

"And I'm her brother," the other added, as if pleading for understanding.

Rehan's fists clenched. His throat tightened. Tears blurred his vision. This was not a burial. This was an abandonment. Fear had strangled love.

The distance from the gate to the grave was only 250 meters. But with every step, Rehan's heart shattered further. The rope dug into the plastic. The body—her body—dragged limply across the dirt. Government officials stood by, silent witnesses to this horror.

Her own family treated her like a thing. A threat.

Rehan's body trembled. Silent sobs wracked his chest. How? His mind screamed. How could they do this?

That night, sleep was impossible. The image burned behind his eyelids—Zebunissa, encased in plastic, hauled like an object. The cold, clinical disposal of a human life. His pillow grew damp with tears. The pandemic hadn't just stolen lives—it had stolen mercy.

Then, with a hand pressed to his aching heart, Rehan made a vow. His voice was soft, but iron ran beneath it.

"No more."

No more plastic shrouds. No more ropes. No more fear erasing dignity.

Every soul deserved respect. Every family deserved kindness.

Four days later, a call came. Zebunissa's COVID test? Negative.

The truth struck like a hammer. She had never been a threat, yet they had treated her as if she were poison.

In that moment, Rehan understood the true enemy. It wasn't just the virus—it was the terror that turned hearts to stone.

And so, his mission began.

One burial at a time, he would fight to bring humanity back from the grave.



The Man Who Refused to Let Fear Bury Humanity

The night after burying Zebunissa, Rehan Golden did not sleep. His heart burned with grief; his mind was a battlefield of sorrow and fury. Dawn came, then morning—yet still, he found himself drawn back to the graveyard. By 11 AM, his loyal team stood beside him, their faces shadowed with exhaustion, their eyes heavy with unspoken fear. None of them knew this would become the day that changed everything.

Rehan's hands trembled. His voice, rough with emotion, cut through the silence like a blade.

“What we saw yesterday...” he began, his words slow, deliberate, *“was not just a tragedy. It was a betrayal.”*

His team stiffened. The air grew thick.

“When we abandon our dead—when we leave them alone, forgotten, like they mean nothing—then we are no longer human.” His voice cracked. *“Fear has made monsters of us. Fear has turned brothers into cowards, sons into strangers. But no more.”*

A heavy pause. The wind itself seemed to hold its breath.

Then, Rehan Golden—his eyes blazing with conviction—made his vow. The first vow. The one that would ignite a fire across the city.

“From this moment forward, no one in this city will be buried without dignity. No one will be left alone. COVID or no COVID, fear or no fear—every soul deserves respect. And we...” He looked at each of them, really looked, as if memorizing their faces for the storm to come, ***“We will be the ones to give it to them.”***

At first, only the graveyard crows witnessed their resolve. Then, word spread like fire through Bhopal.

Stories emerged of Rehan and his team—working tirelessly, burying the abandoned, comforting the dead when no one else would. They performed all the funeral rites, treating the bodies with care and respect. They whispered prayers over nameless graves. They became the first and last responders for those the world had forsaken.

And the people noticed.

Mothers wept in gratitude. Sons whispered thanks into the night. On social media, young voices called them ***“heroes,” “saints,” “Rehan’s Warriors.”*** Prayers were sent for them; blessings were spoken in their names.

But not everyone praised them.

In the shadows, voices hissed:

“Fools.”

“They’ll get themselves killed.”

“This madness starts today—it’ll end with their funerals.”

Even among Rehan's own team, doubt crept in. Amir—his most trusted subordinate, his right hand—felt the weight of fear pressing down.

"Rehan Sir..." Amir finally said one evening, his voice strained, *"What if this is too much? What if today was just the first day of our downfall?"*

Rehan turned to him, his face hardened by resolve.

"Then we die with honor," he said quietly. ***"Better that than live with shame."***

Rumors spread that Rehan was reckless. That he cared more for the dead than the living. That he would get them all infected.

Some of his men hesitated. Some stepped back.

But Rehan Golden did not bend.

Every day, he returned to the graveyard. Every day, he dug graves, carried bodies, recited prayers with the same unwavering devotion. His hands blistered. His body ached. But his spirit? Unbroken.

And slowly... his courage began to change them.

One by one, his team remembered why they followed him. Not because it was easy. Not because it was safe.

But because it was right.

Rehan Golden did not ask for praise. He did not seek glory.

Yet, his name became a beacon.

In homes where candles had flickered out, they were lit again—for him. Mothers told their children of the man who refused to let fear win. Elders spoke of his strength. The poor, the forgotten—they blessed him in their prayers.

And though the world around him shook with terror, Rehan stood firm.

A leader.

A warrior.

The man who planted a flag of humanity in the soil of despair.

This was only the beginning.





11. The Weight of Courage – Rehan Stands Alone... Until His Team Rises

The air was heavy—not just with the suffocating heat of April, but with fear. Fear slithered through the graveyard like a ghost, tightening its grip around the hearts of the men who had once stood unshaken.

A few days after ensuring every burial was carried out with dignity, whispers of doubt had begun to spread. What had started as murmurs had now grown into open hesitation. The mission that had once united them was now tearing them apart.

The sun blazed overhead, turning their protective gear into a suffocating second skin. Sweat rolled down their faces, stinging their eyes, but the discomfort of the heat was nothing compared to the weight of their fear.

Amir—Rehan’s most loyal, his strongest—sat slumped against the gnarled trunk of an old banyan tree. His face was flushed, his breath uneven. Beside him, Papu pressed a hand to Amir’s forehead, his own face tightening with worry.

“You’re burning up,” Papu said in a low, urgent voice. He held up the thermometer. *“102 degrees.”*

Amir’s hands trembled as he took it. His bloodshot eyes flickered over the number, then back to Papu. *“No...”* he whispered, his voice hoarse. *“Check again. It has to be wrong.”*

But they both knew it wasn’t.

Amir had been carrying more than just the weight of the dead. His father had passed only weeks before, leaving him the sole provider for his family—three brothers, a wife, two children, a bedridden mother. The small photo of his family that he kept in his wallet felt heavier these days. Every breath he took was for them. Every risk he took was to put food on their table, medicine in his mother's hands.

And now, this fever.

"What if I have it?" The words slipped out, barely a whisper. His throat tightened. *"What happens to my family if I die? What if... what if I've already given it to them?"*

The other men had gathered nearby, close enough to hear. None spoke. But in their silence, Amir saw his own fear reflected in their eyes.

One of them, usually quick with a joke, kicked at the dirt, his shoulders hunched. Another twisted his wedding ring, thinking of his pregnant wife. A third stood with his arms crossed, staring at the ground as if it might swallow him whole.

Then, Amir did what none of them had dared.

"What if we're risking too much?" His voice cracked. *"We have families too. Why should we die for strangers? Why should we bury people whose own blood won't even touch them?"*

The question hung in the air, thick and suffocating. No one answered.

Two hours later, the growl of an engine cut through the silence.

Rehan Golden's Scorpio SUV rolled to a stop, dust swirling around it like a phantom. He stepped out, exhaustion etched into the lines of his face—but his eyes were steel. Unbroken.

His presence alone seemed to steady the air, as if the earth itself held its breath for him.

“Two COVID-19 bodies. This evening,” he announced calmly, his voice carrying the weight of command and an unspoken promise: *I will not ask you to do what I won’t do myself.*

The team didn’t move.

When the ambulance arrived, its siren wailing like a lament, the men stayed back. The medical staff unloaded the bodies—wrapped in plastic, nameless, feared even in death.

Mr. Golden looked at the team, wondering why they did not step forward. Finally, one team member hesitantly said, *“If even their own families don’t care enough to give them a proper burial, why should we risk our lives for them?”* He pointed toward a small group of relatives standing about thirty feet away—some crying, but none coming closer.

Mr. Rehan Golden’s eyes flashed with surprise and anger. *“Why should we risk our lives?”* he repeated, his voice sharp. The question hung in the air, and suddenly, no one could meet his gaze. The team member who had spoken now stared at the ground. Rehan’s silence that followed was louder than any shout.

His face was calm, but his eyes showed a determination forged in fires they couldn’t yet imagine. A gentle breeze moved his Arabic scarf, the fabric fluttering like a battle standard, as he looked from his team to the bodies. He did not reply immediately. Instead, he slowly walked toward them, his steps steady on the uneven ground, each footfall a testament to his unyielding resolve.

The sun dipped low, painting the graveyard in gold and shadow. The only sound was the whisper of the wind and the distant chirping of crickets.

Rehan knelt. Not as a man defeated, but as a warrior bowing before the sacred. With his own hands—bare, unshielded—he peeled back the plastic shroud, his fingers trembling not with fear, but with reverence.

And then—he began the burial rites.

No gloves. No mask. No hesitation. Just a man who refused to let death strip the dead of their dignity, even if the world had abandoned them.

The team watched, stunned. Amir's breath caught in his throat.

"Mr. Golden—" his voice trembled. "Why are you doing this? Their own family won't come near them! Aren't you scared?"

Rehan paused and looked up, his face illuminated by the dying light. There was no judgment in his eyes—only the quiet fire of a man who had long since made peace with fear.

"Yes, Amir. I am scared."

His voice was quiet, yet it carried like thunder. He pressed a hand to his chest.

"I feel it right here. But I am more afraid of something else."

A beat. The world seemed to hold its breath.

"I am afraid that if we let fear take our humanity... then what's left of us is worth nothing at all."

Amir's fists clenched. Shame burned in his gut—hotter than the fever. Because in that moment, he saw Rehan Golden for what he truly was: not just a leader, but a beacon. A man who stood where others stepped back, who touched what others feared to approach, who carried the weight of the dead so the living could remember what it meant to be human.

And then—

He stepped forward.

“We’ll do it too.”

One by one, the others followed. They worked in silence, their fear now overshadowed by something greater.

Papu was the first to join him. He tightened his gloves. *“My father used to say... courage isn’t the absence of fear. It’s doing what’s right despite it.”*

Another team member nodded in agreement. *“Some things are worth the risk.”*

The relatives, watching from a distance, slowly inched closer. A young man, tears streaming down his face, whispered, *“Thank you... for giving my uncle what I couldn’t.”*

Under the darkening sky, with the first stars blinking to life above them, Rehan Golden’s team buried the dead.

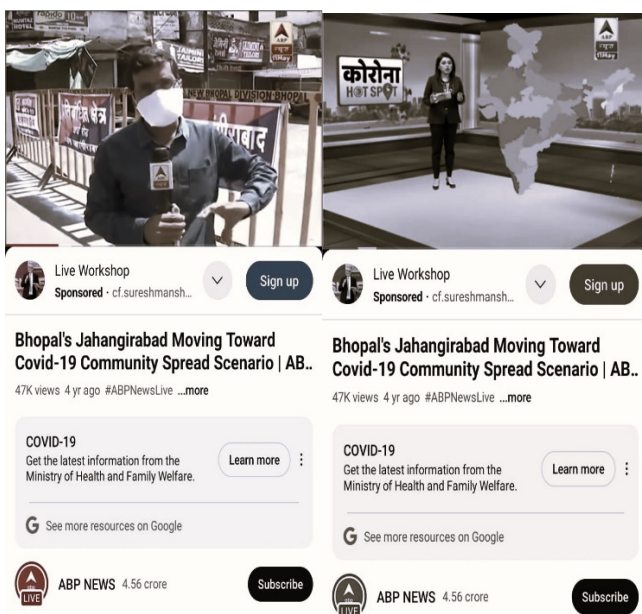
Not as laborers.

Not as victims of fear.

But as men who had chosen, in the face of terror, to remain human.

And in that moment—they were more than a team. They were legends. And at their center stood Rehan Golden—not because he demanded it, but because he had earned it.





ABP News broadcasted a report on the severity of COVID in the Jahangirabad area.



12. When Old Heroes Run, New Heroes Stand Tall

Day after day, we pushed through bone-deep exhaustion, raw fear, and gnawing doubt. In the kitchen, our hands moved without rest, preparing meals for hungry families. In the graveyard, we fought to give every soul a dignified farewell. Many of us hadn't seen our own worried families in days. But the need was too great to stop.

The kitchen walls had witnessed countless sleepless nights. Pots clanged against metal as volunteers stirred huge pots of rice and lentils. The rich scent of spices mixed strangely with the sharp smell of disinfectant – our new normal.

As pressure mounted, spirits frayed. One morning, Rehan sat at his desk, rubbing bloodshot eyes. His fingers shook as he tried to manage kitchen lists. Names and numbers swam before his tired eyes. His phone rang, sharp in the silence.

Yes? he answered, his voice rough.

Worry crackled through the line. *Rehan, sir,* Amir said softly, tension tight in his words. *Some of the team can't go on. Ansar's telling everyone to quit. He says we need sleep, family time... He's winning them over.*

How many are left? Rehan asked, dread heavy in his stomach.

Most left the graveyard. Only four of us remain, Amir's voice dropped. *But eight bodies are coming tonight.*

Rehan's heart sank. He stood suddenly, knocking over an empty teacup. It rolled but didn't break. He stood frozen, shoulders hunched.

Just then, his nephew Aadil walked in. Dark circles shadowed Aadil's eyes, but his step was quick. *Uncle, kitchen supplies are low*— he started, waving a notepad.

Rehan didn't hear. His mind was trapped at the graveyard.

Aadil stepped closer. *Uncle?* He waved a hand. *Are you okay?*

Finally, Rehan spoke, his voice quiet and heavy. *Eight bodies coming. Only four team members left.* He ran a hand through his graying beard. *The rest... phones off. They're gone.*

Aadil's eyes widened. *Gone? All of them?*

Before Aadil could say more, Rehan's phone buzzed again. He answered fast. It was Amir, more urgent now, the sound of shovels hitting dirt sharp in the background.

Rehan, sir, three bodies arrive in two hours, Amir breathed hard. *We need more hands. Grave digging... it breaks you.*

They were in deep trouble. Rehan turned to Aadil, sudden determination sharpening his gaze. *How many in the kitchen now?*

Aadil counted quickly. *Eight.*

Take three to the graveyard, Rehan ordered. He grabbed his scarf, wrapping it fast. *Get there now.* He was already heading for the door, footsteps fading down the hall.

Aadil stared at the empty doorway, then sprang into action. He called cousins, friends. His fingers trembled dialing number after number. Everyone refused. Fear of the virus was too strong.

Please, we need you, Aadil begged, his voice cracking. Just one day.

I'm sorry, Aadil. I have children, came a cold reply. Can't risk it.

Another call, another no. Those bodies are walking disease. No way.

I was working in the kitchen with Fahim and Salman when Aadil burst in. Face flushed, eyes wild. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he explained.

Need volunteers at the graveyard. Right now, he gasped. Uncle Rehan's already there.

I knew we had to help. I put down my ladle. *Count me in*, I said, sounding braver than I felt.

Fahim and Salman hesitated, fear flashing across their faces. Fahim stepped back, shaking his head. *The graveyard? With COVID bodies? I... I can't.*

Salman looked down, wringing his hands. *My mother... she's sick. If I bring this home...* He trailed off.

After a heavy silence, under Aadil's desperate gaze, they agreed. Fahim squared his shoulders. *Alright. I'll do it.*

Salman nodded slowly. *Me too.*

Together, we gathered nine people. With Amir's four, we had fourteen. But only Amir and a few others knew proper body handling. The rest of us were clueless but ready.

We raced to the graveyard, our motorcycles kicking up dust clouds. The engines roared like battle cries. The merciless sun beat down as if trying to push us back. We arrived twenty-five minutes after Amir's call.

The graveyard stretched before us, fresh earth mounds marking the pandemic's toll. We skidded to a stop. Removing helmets, I saw Rehan directing Amir's team, his voice tight, his arms sharp.

When we appeared, the working team looked up. Faces lit with sudden hope. Relief flickered across Rehan's face before his focus snapped back. His shoulders eased slightly, then straightened.

Thank God! a worker called, dropping his shovel. *We thought we were alone!*

Amir rushed toward us, kicking up dust, exhaustion etched deep but his eyes suddenly alive. *You came! You actually came!* he exclaimed, his voice cracking as he gripped my hand. His red-rimmed eyes shone.

Aadil stepped forward, his hand on Amir's shoulder. *Uncle Rehan told us. We wouldn't leave you alone,* he said, adjusting his mask.

We're a team, right? Fahim added, patting Amir's back. *Though I never thought I'd be happy to see a graveyard.*

Tired laughter broke some tension.

Rehan pointed to protective gear. *Wear these. Always. No exceptions.*

We started working. Shovels felt foreign, heavy. Skin peeled away with each strike into the hard earth. The first body arrived soon after in a special ambulance. The driver, fully suited, looked unreal.

Who's receiving? his voice muffled.

Amir stepped forward, slow with fatigue. *We are.*

We tried following burial rituals under Amir's guidance. But digging was brutal. The earth was baked stone. Our inexperienced hands were slow. Sweat soaked us.

Deeper! Amir called out, worried. Six feet!

I'm trying, Fahim gasped, his face red. Ground's like concrete.

Progress was painfully slow. Relatives waiting nearby grew restless, their grief turning sharp. An older man stepped closer, his mask slipping down. His voice shook with frustration and pain. *How much longer? We called hours ago!*

Amir raised his hands, trying to placate him. *Sir, please. We're working as fast as we can.*

But the man wasn't satisfied. *You call this a grave?* he spat, pointing a shaking finger at the shallow pit. *It's uneven! Shallow! Improper! My brother deserves better than this!*

His anger ignited others. A man in a black kurta pushed forward, his face tight with rage. *Is this how you treat our dead?* he cried, his voice breaking. *Like animals? Thrown in a hole?* His fists clenched at his sides.

Anger hung thick in the air, choking us. We tried to calm them, our voices strained. Our words hit a solid wall of grief and fury.

Please, we just need more time, I pleaded, raising my hands, palms out. *We're doing everything we can.*

One man, his face red and contorted, shoved past the flimsy yellow tape and stormed towards us. *Nothing you do is good enough!* he yelled, spit flying from his mouth. He shoved Amir hard in the chest. Amir stumbled back, eyes wide with shock and hurt.

Another relative, a young man with burning, accusing eyes, yelled directly at Aadil and me. *You have no idea what we're going through! This is a disaster! A disgrace!*

We're trying! Aadil snapped back, his patience finally snapping. *Where were you when we needed diggers? Where were you?*

Chaos threatened to swallow everything. Voices crashed over each other like storm waves. Fists punched the air, shaking with rage. Two angry relatives screamed cruel words at us, spit flying from their mouths as they yelled. Their words cut like sharp knives.

You're ruining this holy work! one man roared, his face twisted.

Stupid fools! You don't know anything! another shouted, his eyes burning with hate.

Disrespecting the dead! cried a third. Their insults stung deep, cutting through our exhaustion. It felt brutally, crushingly unfair.

How dare you? a man in a black shirt shouted at Salman, jabbing a finger. *My father deserves respect! Proper respect!*

And what about us? Salman shot back, throwing down his shovel with a clang. *Don't we deserve respect too? We're here!*

We weren't trained for this. We were doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers. We stepped up only because it desperately needed doing. Yet here we were, digging graves with bleeding, blistered hands while strangers who didn't even know our names screamed insults at us. Pain and anger swirled, hot and blinding. We shouted back, our voices raw. My heart pounded against my ribs. Fahim threw dirt down in frustration. Aadil stood toe-to-toe with a relative, their faces inches apart, hot breath fogging masks.

You have no idea what we've given up! Aadil shouted, his finger jabbing the tense air between them. *No idea!*

It was about to explode into violence.

Then, Rehan stepped forward. Calm. Steady. A rock in the raging storm. He walked slowly, deliberately, placing himself squarely between us and the angry relatives. He raised his hand, palm out. Silence fell instantly, like a command had been spoken.

Enough. His voice wasn't loud, but it carried more weight than all our shouts combined. The noise died away, leaving only heavy breathing.

Rehan faced the angry relatives, his stance wide and solid. He looked each one directly in the eye. His voice was steady, low, but full of deep feeling.

This, he said clearly, pointing to the shrouded body waiting nearby, is your loved one. He paused, letting the words sink in. *Your family. Your flesh and blood.* He paused again, his gaze sweeping over them. *But where were you when it mattered? When they needed cleansing according to our faith? When they needed preparation for their final journey?*

He gestured towards the body, then back at the relatives, keeping his distance. *You refused to step closer. You chose safety over dignity, over love.* His voice held simple truth, not harsh blame. *That was your choice. I don't blame the fear. It is real.* He paused, his eyes moving to his exhausted team. *While you stayed away, we stepped in. Risking our lives, our families, to give your dead the respect they deserved. The respect you could not give.*

His words landed like hammer blows. Honest. Clear. Cutting through the anger. *And now, after all that sacrifice, you insult us? You push us? Is this right? Is this how you thank people who risked their lives, their health, for your family?*

The crowd shifted uncomfortably. Eyes dropped to the dusty ground. Anger melted away, replaced by hot shame. Silence fell, heavy and deep and filled with regret.

The man who had shoved Amir stepped forward hesitantly. His face softened, the anger replaced by deep embarrassment. *I'm... I apologize*, he said quietly, extending his hand towards Amir. *That was wrong. My brother... he would be ashamed of me today.*

Amir nodded slowly, accepting the handshake. *We understand*, he said, his voice weary. *Difficult times. For everyone.*

Rehan had calmed the storm not with force, but with raw, heart-spoken truth. It was a moment none of us would ever forget.

We kept working, the air still thick but quieter now. Despite our inexperience, we buried the first three bodies with care. It took six agonizing hours – twice the normal time. More bodies arrived. We were utterly drained, moving like sleepwalkers. Ten bodies came in total that day, the last two arriving under cold starlight. We dug, lifted, prayed. The shovels grew heavier with each strike. Muscles screamed in protest. Throats burned with thirst and unshed tears.

Can't feel my arms, Salman whispered hoarsely as we carefully lowered the eighth body into the deep pit. His face was ghostly pale, streaked with dirt and sweat.

Just two more, I replied, my own voice distant, my body numb. *We can. We have to.*

Finally, we finished. Ten bodies. Laid to rest with the dignity our tired hands, bleeding blisters, and aching hearts could offer. The final prayer rose from voices hoarse and thin in the vast night air.

Darkness wrapped the graveyard like a heavy blanket. We knew, bone-deep, we couldn't keep this up. The kitchen, the graveyard, the constant fear, the crushing exhaustion – it was breaking us, piece by piece.

Rehan stood silently among the fresh mounds of earth. His shoulders slumped with the immense weight, but his eyes remained steady. He looked at each of us, covered in dirt and sweat, our faces hollow with fatigue.

Go home, he said gently, the command gone, replaced by deep weariness. *Rest. Be with your families. See them.*

Tomorrow? Amir asked, leaning hard on his shovel for support, barely standing.

Rehan sighed, a long, slow sound, and looked up at the countless stars. *Tomorrow will come. We will face it. For now*, he looked around at the filled graves, *we did what was needed. What no one else would do.*

Covered in sweat and dust, a quiet, fierce pride filled us, warming the cold exhaustion. Against the tide of fear, the pull of selfishness, and an invisible, deadly enemy, we had chosen to fight. To stand tall, to bear the weight, for those who could no longer speak for themselves.

Walking slowly to our bikes, our steps heavy as lead, Aadil spoke the words that echoed in all our hearts. *Never thought*, he murmured, *that digging graves... would make me feel... truly human.*

Fahim nodded beside him, no jokes left in him. *Today*, he said simply, *we were the family they didn't have at the end.*

One day. Just one day in the long, brutal battle of the pandemic. Many more challenges, many more bodies, waited in the shadows. But for now, exhausted and aching, we had won a small, hard victory against despair. Sometimes, that's enough to keep going. Sometimes, it has to be.



The graveyard team and kitchen staff sat together, sharing dinner in the graveyard office.





13. Rehan Golden & the Police Officer Who Shouldered Death's Burden

The ambulance sat baking under the cruel summer sun, as lifeless as the body it held. Guddu, the driver, wiped his trembling hand across his wet brow. His face showed pure desperation as he fought a losing battle against time and a dead engine. Sweat soaked his uniform; each failed attempt to start the vehicle stabbed him with fresh helplessness.

"Try again," he begged, his voice raw. "Please... start." His knuckles turned white around the key as he turned it once more, only to hear the same empty click.

Inside waited a soul for its final journey. Tension filled the air as the dead man's relatives paced around, their faces showing growing impatience. The brother of the deceased, a middle-aged man, checked his watch for the fifth time, his foot tapping an angry beat on the dusty ground.

"How much longer?" he snapped, throwing his hands up. "We've been here an hour!" His words cut through the heat, sharp with irritation rather than grief.

"I'm doing everything I can, sir," Guddu answered, his eyes fixed on the cracked ground, his shoulders slumped. "The engine... it just won't start. I don't know what else to do."

He reached for his phone, his damp fingers smudging the screen. His only hope was Rehan Golden. "Rehan bhai," he whispered, his voice breaking. "I need you. I don't know who else to call."

Rehan Golden's voice came back calm and steady, like a lifeline. "Where are you, Guddu?"

"At Shabban Chouraha," Guddu replied.

"I'm on my way."

Minutes later, Rehan arrived, his quiet strength cutting through the growing despair. Sweat beaded on his forehead, but his eyes remained clear and focused. He placed a hand on Guddu's shoulder, silently offering support.

"What happened?" he asked, his eyes sweeping over the ambulance, the restless relatives, the heavy weight of sorrow.

As Guddu explained, Rehan's forehead wrinkled with concern. He knelt to look at the engine, his mind already throwing out impossible solutions. He made several calls, his face darkening after each one.

"The nearest mechanic is hours away," he said, putting away his phone. "And even then, there's no guarantee of a quick fix."

He took a deep breath and turned to the small group. "We're four strong men," he said, his voice quiet but firm, his eyes meeting each person's gaze. "The graveyard is only three hundred meters away. We can carry him."

The family members exchanged uneasy glances. Then, as if pushed by an invisible force, they backed away, fear tightening their faces.

"No," the brother stated flatly, shaking his head. "Absolutely not. It's a COVID case. We can't risk it." The shake in his voice revealed the fear beneath his harsh words.

"But he was your brother," Rehan said softly, his eyes holding a quiet plea.

"We have families," another relative mumbled, staring at the ground. "We can't get sick."

Their fear outweighed their love. Rehan felt deep sadness but masked it with calm strength. His jaw tightened, then relaxed. "I understand," he said, the words tasting bitter.

The sun beat down mercilessly. Rehan felt the crushing weight of responsibility. Guddu watched helplessly, defeat etched on his face. The relatives huddled together, whispering—more concerned about leaving quickly than honoring their loved one.

Only four of Amir's team remained at the graveyard, joined by eight overwhelmed kitchen workers. No one else would handle COVID victims. Rehan looked around desperately for any sign of help. Guddu stood defeated. The relatives turned away from the ambulance, distancing themselves from death itself.

Rehan's hand shook as he made another call, his shoulders dropping, his eyes briefly closing—silently admitting defeat. Lost in thought, his forehead creased with worry, he barely noticed when a police siren cut through the air.

A jeep pulled up, kicking up dust. A man with a commanding presence stepped out—Town Inspector Virendra Singh Chouhan, the Officer-in-Charge of the Jahangirabad Police Station. His uniform looked crisp, his posture perfect, his eyes quickly taking in the scene. He approached Rehan with a warm smile. "Rehan sahab, how are you? What's the problem?" His deep voice cut through the tension.

Rehan stepped forward, relief washing over him. "The ambulance is broken," he explained, gesturing toward it. "We need to get this body to the graveyard, but..." He glanced at the distant relatives with their averted eyes.

Inspector Chouhan followed his gaze, understanding immediately. "COVID case?" he asked softly.

Rehan nodded, his eyes silently pleading for help.

Without a word, Inspector Chouhan turned to his constable, a young man standing straight and alert. "Constable," he called.

The constable approached, his steps slightly hesitant but his face determined.

"We're going to help these men," Inspector Chouhan said, starting to unbutton his sweat-dampened uniform shirt. He looked at Rehan, his eyes showing a deep sense of duty, sleeves already rolled to the elbows in the summer heat. "No one should make their final journey alone."

What happened next was remarkable. Inspector Chouhan, the constable, Rehan, and Guddu stepped forward. They approached the ambulance with resolute faces and hearts full of shared compassion.

"On three," Inspector Chouhan said softly, positioning themselves. "One, two, three."

They lifted the body, each man carrying the weight with deep respect. Guddu's legs shook, but he stood firm, strengthened by Rehan's encouraging nod.

The relatives stood frozen, mouths open in disbelief as they watched strangers—men they had never met—shoulder their loved one's final burden. Each step the four men took carried unspoken meaning, their footprints marking a path of unexpected grace.

One relative whispered, "I can't believe they're doing this," his voice mixing shame with awe.

Silence fell, deep and complete. Their actions spoke louder than any words could.

As they neared the graveyard, a profound quiet settled over them. These men, bound not by blood but by shared humanity, gently laid the body to rest. The care they showed a stranger brought tears to their eyes.

Rehan stepped back, his chest tight with emotion. He looked at Inspector Chouhan, his stern face now softened by compassion; at the young constable standing tall; at Guddu, whose eyes shone with exhaustion and quiet pride.

"Thank you," Rehan whispered, his voice choked. "Thank you."

Inspector Chouhan placed a hand on Rehan's shoulder. "This is our duty," he said simply, his voice thick with emotion.

In that moment, they stood united—four men from different worlds, bound by an act of profound kindness.

As final prayers were whispered, the relatives approached hesitantly. They stood at the group's edge, heads bowed in grief and shame. Tears flowed, washing away fear and selfishness.

"We should have carried him," the brother said, his voice breaking. "He deserved better."

Rehan looked at him with compassion, not judgment. "Fear can blind us," he said gently. "But it's never too late to see clearly."

The relatives left changed. Their steps were slower, more thoughtful. They had been humbled by the kindness of strangers who, in a moment of need, had become family.

As the four men walked back, their shadows stretching long in the setting sun, they carried not death's weight, but the profound lightness of having honored life and the lasting essence of what it means to be human.



(TI stands for Town Inspector, commonly known as the Thana Incharge or Station House Officer (SHO) in Indian police terminology. The TI is the officer in charge of a police station and is responsible for law enforcement in that area.)



This photo features former TI of Jahangirabad Police Station, Virendra Singh Chouhan, whose bravery during the pandemic earned him a well-deserved promotion to Deputy Superintendent of Police. His dedication stands as a testament to true heroism in times of crisis.



Heart Over Duty: Policeman Chauhan's Choice

The streets were quiet, but worry filled the air. A group of 15–20 vegetable sellers slowly pushed their carts toward Jahangirabad Police Station, their faces heavy with fear. People watched, wondering—*what had gone wrong?*

A police jeep arrived, carrying Town Inspector Virendra Singh Chauhan and his team. Their expressions were stern, their voices sharp. The vegetable sellers stood frozen, their heads bowed.

A sub-inspector shouted, *"We warned you again and again! Why didn't you follow the rules?"* The sellers trembled as the officers scolded them. TI Chauhan, known for his kindness, was angry this time—not just at them, but at himself.

He had always understood their struggle. They gathered every day at the open ground near the Center Point building in Jinsi, right behind the old slaughterhouse—not to cause trouble, but simply to earn an honest living and bring food home for their families. He had turned a blind eye because hunger was a bigger danger than the virus. But now, they had crossed a line—moving their carts to the front of Central Point Building, ignoring safety rules completely.

When senior officers found out, TI Chauhan was reprimanded. Hurt and frustrated, he ordered his team to seize the carts. *"If they won't listen, we have no choice,"* he said.

But as he sat in his office, he heard something that shattered his heart—the sound of grown men crying.

"Sir, please!" one seller begged, tears streaming down his face. *"Take our carts, and we lose everything. How will we feed our children?"*

The sub-inspector remained firm. *"Rules are rules. You ignored our warnings."*

TI Chauhan watched from his window, his chest tight. For the first time, doing his duty felt wrong. A war raged inside him—should he be a strict officer or a compassionate human?

Finally, his heart won.

He called his team back. *"Bring them all inside,"* he said.

Minutes later, the vegetable sellers stood before him, their eyes filled with fear and hope.

TI Chauhan spoke softly but firmly: *"We want to help you, but you must follow the rules. No more gatherings without distance. Promise me."*

Relief washed over the sellers' faces. Some even smiled through their tears.

That day, TI Chauhan proved something beautiful—even in the hardest times, kindness can win.

Because sometimes, being human is the greatest duty of all.





14. Heroes in the Heat: How a Flour Crisis Tested Rehan Golden's Team

The April sun blazed mercilessly over the small office building, its heat pressing down like a heavy hand. Yet inside those walls, something extraordinary pulsed through the air—hope. Not the kind that comes easily, but the kind forged in sweat, sacrifice, and sleepless nights.

At the heart of it all sat Rehan Golden, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, his dark eyes burning with quiet determination. His desk was a battlefield of scattered papers—supply lists, volunteer schedules, vehicle logs—each one a lifeline for those who had none. The weight of responsibility rested on his shoulders, but his spirit never wavered.

Through the thin walls, the sounds of their mission echoed:

- The rustle of stacked grain sacks.
- The murmur of exhausted volunteers catching moments of rest on thin mats.
- The crackling radio delivering grim updates on rising COVID-19 cases.

Outside, beneath a makeshift shelter of metal and canvas, three enormous pots bubbled over open flames, filling the air with the rich, comforting aroma of spiced lentils and rice.

Rehan Golden stood, his joints protesting after hours of relentless work. Around him, his team moved like a well-oiled machine, divided into four vital units:

1. **Team 1 (The Graveyard Crew)** – Led by Amir, they carried the heaviest burden. Just yesterday, Amir had returned with dirt under his fingernails, his voice breaking as he whispered, *“Three more today—two old men and an old woman, left unclaimed. The government ambulance delivered them, their families nowhere to be found.”*
2. **Team 2 (Guardians of Hope)** – They protected and carefully arranged their precious food supplies, ensuring every grain was accounted for.
3. **Team 3 (The Kitchen Warriors)** – They transformed simple ingredients into meals that brought tears to the eyes of those who received them.
4. **Team 4 (The Fearless Deliverers)** – They ventured into virus-ravaged neighborhoods where even emergency services feared to tread, carrying food, medicine, and—most importantly—human connection.

Mr. Golden wasn't alone. Aadil and Mr. Farooq shared his burden of leadership. They were supported by:

- **Family:** Rehan's brothers—Irshad, Irfan, Imran, and Anwar—and his nephews: Aadil (including me), Hamza, Anas, Adnan, Zain, Arib, Zeeshan, and Farhan.
- **Friends:** Majid, Mayank, Abid, Sudeep, Mehboob, and Mujahid and many more.

Each one was driven by the same unshakable belief: *No one should go hungry. No one should be forgotten.*

We worked without rest, sometimes going days without sleep. We were sustained only by the gratitude in the eyes of those we helped:

- The widow who clutched our hands.
- The children who waved from windows.
- The elderly man who insisted on giving us his prized watch—all he had left.

At 5:30 AM, the kitchen was already alive with motion. Steam rose from giant pots as volunteers chopped vegetables with practiced hands. Mr. Farooq moved among them, calm and steady, handing empty bags to the delivery team.

“Each bag will hold between 80 and 100 food packets,” he explained, his eyes crinkling with warmth. *“They’re heavy, but remember—each one is a lifeline.”*

Hamza tested a bag’s weight. *“Nothing heavier than the thought of someone going hungry,”* he said quietly. Nods of agreement rippled through the group.

I shouldered my bag with a dramatic groan. *“I used to complain about carrying my school backpack,”* I joked. *“Now look at me—delivery boy extraordinaire!”* Precious laughter followed.

In the corner, bent over simmering lentils, stood Irshad Ahmed, Mr. Golden’s elder brother. At 67, battling heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure, his body was frail but his spirit unbreakable. Despite his family’s concern, he showed up daily to ensure everything ran smoothly.

“The greatest duty in the eyes of Allah is to serve humanity,” he would remind everyone. *“And humanity needs us now more than ever.”*

His presence inspired while casting a shadow of worry. We knew how dangerous COVID-19 was for someone in his condition, but Irshad refused to stay home. His gentle conviction reminded us of our work’s deeper meaning.

By 7:00 AM, the kitchen hummed with energy:

- Pots clanged.

- Voices called for ingredients.
- The scent of cumin and coriander mingled with the warm, yeasty smell of freshly made bread (*roti*).

Then—disaster struck.

As the sun climbed high, turning the kitchen into an oven, Anas opened the flour container and froze.

“Oh no,” he whispered. He dipped his hand in, letting flour fall through his fingers. *“This is... this isn’t right.”*

I looked up from chopping onions, eyes already red. *“What’s wrong?”*

Anas gestured helplessly. *“The flour... it’s spoiled. There’s a sour smell, and look—there are small bugs.”*

I hurried over, examining it with frustration. *“How did we miss this during inventory? Mr. Golden always tells us to check everything.”*

Word spread quickly. Our team gathered, faces falling as we grasped the implications. Without flour, there would be no bread. Without bread, our meal packets would be incomplete.

Zeeshan checked his watch with a worried frown. *“We have five hours until the noon distribution. What are we going to do?”*

Anas paced back and forth, his medical transcriptionist’s fingers fidgeting nervously. *“We can’t serve this to anyone. It could make people sick.”*

Sudeep crossed his arms, all humor gone. *“Mr. Golden always reminded us to keep a check on our supplies. This is on us. We messed up.”*

Hamza’s deep voice cut through the murmurs. *“We need to tell him. Now.”*

We found Mr. Golden in his office reviewing medicine supply records with Mr. Farooq. Both men looked up as we entered, expressions shifting from concentration to concern.

“*What is it?*” Mr. Golden asked, setting down his pen.

Anas stepped forward, shoulders slumped. “*Uncle, the entire new flour delivery turned out to be rotten. We’re left with only the 10 kilograms from yesterday to make the bread (roti). We didn’t check it properly—and now, we can’t make bread for all the parcels today.*”

A heavy silence fell. We held our breath, expecting disappointment or anger. Instead, Rehan sighed deeply and stood.

“*Mistakes happen,*” he said, his voice steady and calm. His eyes moved from face to face—not accusing, but reassuring. “*What matters is how we fix them. Let’s focus on a solution.*”

The tension in the room eased. Shoulders relaxed.

Mr. Farooq asked, ever practical: “*Do we have any backup flour?*”

Zeeshan shook his head. “*We used the last of our backup flour four days ago when the supply delivery was delayed.*”

Rehan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “*Who might have flour in stock right now?*”

By 9:30 AM, after a flurry of calls, we discovered a shopkeeper in Itwara had flour—but at triple the normal price due to shortages.

Adnan echoed in disbelief: “*Three times the usual price? Uncle, we’re already struggling to raise enough funds for our regular supplies.*”

Rehan stood silently, eyes closed as if making mental calculations. When he opened them, determination had replaced deliberation.

“We need that flour, no matter the cost,” he said firmly, his hand coming down on the desk with quiet emphasis. *“I’ll figure out the money. Be ready to cook as soon as it arrives.”*

He turned to Majid. *“Take the truck. Go now.”*

Majid nodded, already fishing keys from his pocket. *“I’ll leave right away.”*

At 11:30 AM, while we prepared other components and worried about time slipping away, a truck rumbled into the yard. Majid jumped out, grinning widely.

“Two thousand kilograms of wheat flour, as ordered!” he announced, slapping his hands together with satisfaction.

We rushed to unload, forming a human chain. As we worked, word spread about Mr. Golden’s decision.

Abid told those who hadn’t been present: *“He didn’t even hesitate. Not for a second.”*

Despite wheat prices soaring to three times normal, Mr. Golden remained unwavering. Some admired his dedication, knowing he ran the kitchen entirely on his own funds. Others worried—without donations, how long could this continue? Yet, Mr. Golden had made his choice, paying from his dwindling savings and refusing to let hunger win.

Back in the kitchen, despite the setback, the work roared back to life. Hands moved faster; fatigue was pushed aside; and somehow, against all odds, the meals began to come together. Amidst the chaos, laughter and humor lightened the heavy air.

Dr. Aamir, the pathologist, kneaded dough with the precision of a surgeon, chuckling as he said:

“You know, I’ve spent years examining tissues under a microscope. Never thought I’d be diagnosing flour instead!”

Anas, the medical transcriptionist, chopped onions with lightning speed, tears streaming down his face. *“If only my typing speed could protect me from these onions!”* he groaned, blinking furiously.

Dr. Ajmal, the dentist, shaped perfect rounds of dough, grinning as he remarked:

“Filling cavities is one thing, but shaping bread? Now that’s real precision work!”

Laughter rippled through the kitchen—a brief, precious respite from the weight of their challenges.

Through it all, Irshad moved among us, his steps slow but purposeful. His frail frame, slightly stooped, nevertheless conveyed strength as he offered quiet encouragement.

“It’s not just food we’re giving,” he reminded us, his voice soft but weighty. *“It’s hope, love, and a little bit of humanity.”*

As the hours stretched on, fatigue began to take its toll. Zain stumbled, nearly overwhelmed by exhaustion. But before he could fall, Irshad was there with his thin yet steady hand on Zain’s shoulder, softly advising:

“Pace yourself, beta (son). This is a marathon, not a sprint.”

Zain nodded, drawing strength from Irshad’s quiet support.

By 2:00 PM, the meal packets were ready—complete with fresh, warm bread (*roti*).

As the delivery teams prepared to leave, Rehan gathered everyone in the yard. The sun beat down, but a soft breeze carried his words to each of them.

"Today, we faced a challenge that could have broken us," he said, his voice strong. "But because of your dedication, hundreds of people will not go to bed hungry tonight." He looked at each of them, pride shining in his eyes. "This is what it means to serve—to find solutions, not excuses."

We nodded, exhaustion evident but satisfaction shining in our eyes.

As the teams headed out, Irshad stood beside Rehan, leaning slightly on his brother for support.

"You know," Irshad said softly, "in chess, the true test of a player isn't how they handle winning—it's how they respond when the game seems lost."

Rehan smiled, arm around his brother's thin shoulders. *"And how did we do today, chess master?"*

Irshad's eyes twinkled behind his glasses. *"You moved the right pieces at the right time. A grandmaster couldn't have done better."*

By 10:00 PM, as night fell, the building grew quiet. In the hall, volunteers rested—some already asleep, others talking in hushed voices. In the kitchen, the last pots were being scrubbed. In his tiny office, Rehan sat alone, calculating budget adjustments for the coming weeks.

A soft knock interrupted his thoughts. Mr. Farooq entered with two cups of tea, placing one on Rehan's desk before settling across from him.

"You did great today," Farooq said simply.

Rehan sipped his tea, warmth spreading through him. *"We all did."*

Farooq nodded, then gestured toward the open door where volunteers were already preparing for another day. *“A team is only as strong as its leader. They follow your example.”*

Rehan watched them, pride swelling in his chest. *“It’s not just about feeding people,”* he said softly. *“It’s about giving them hope. And today... we did just that.”*

During a global pandemic, this unlikely team—doctors, drivers, teachers, technicians, businessmen, lawyers, engineers—achieved something remarkable. Led by Mr. Rehan Golden and Mr. Irshad, we discovered that heroism lies in showing up, solving problems, and putting others first.

As the city slept, we prepared for another day of service, another day of hope.



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पहले से डायबिटीज से पीड़ित था।
गुजरात में कोरोना से मरने वालों
का आंकड़ा 5 पर पहुँच गया है।

जम्मू-कश्मीर में भी संक्रमण से
62 साल के व्यक्ति की जान चली
गई। वह तंगमार्ग का रहने वाला था।

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गरीबों को खिलाया खाना



दैनिक पृथ्वीलहर भोपाल। भोपाल कांग्रेस
के महामंत्री आदिल गोल्डन और उनके
पिता रेहान गोल्डन ने जहांगीराबाद में
500 ज्यादा गरीबों को खाना बांटा
उन्होंने बताया कि हमारा देश करो ना
जैसी महामारी से जुझ रहा है जिसकी
वजह से पूरे देश में लोग डाउन किया
गया है और जिस वजह से गरीब और
बेसहारा लोगों को खाना नहीं मिल पा

रहा है यह बहुत ही गंभीर विषय है आज
के समय का आदिल गोल्डन ने
जहांगीराबाद रह वासियों की मदद
से खाने का प्रबंध किया उन्होंने अपनी पूरी
टीम के साथ पूरे भोपाल शहर में 500
से अधिक लोगों को खाना बांटा आदिल
गोल्डन ने बताया कि मैं इसी तरह पूरे
लाख डाउन में गरीबों की मदद करता
रहूंगा।

दैनिक
शम

Dainik Sadhya Prithvi newspaper featured Aadil and Rehan Golden's efforts to feed Bhopal's needy during the lockdown. Their dedication remains a beacon of hope in tough times.



15. Engineers, Lawyers, Doctors: Digging Graves with Humanity.... and Humor

The fifth day without the regular burial crew felt like it would never end. Amir wiped his forehead, his shirt sticking to his back like wet paper. He glanced at his four teammates—their faces tired, but their eyes still burning with stubborn determination.

The real heroes? The kitchen and distribution team, led by the unshakably calm Mr. Rehan Golden. Normally, these ten or eleven people spent their days cooking and serving meals. But today? They stood under the blazing sun, gripping spades like they were alien objects. Engineers with soft office hands, doctors used to clean gloves, lawyers who argued in courtrooms, and businessmen who'd never held a shovel—all of them now sweating together, digging side by side.

Dig. Pause. Wipe sweat. Repeat.

Oh, those endless days! Fresh and untrained, our kitchen teams crept through every job—twice as slow, sometimes thrice, compared to the steady graveyard team. By late afternoon, our palms were raw, fingers cracked and bleeding. Hands that once typed reports, wrote prescriptions, or signed contracts now ached with every movement.

When we finally finished, the sun hung low, painting the sky in golden streaks. Exhausted but weirdly proud, we dragged

ourselves to the graveyard office, where mattresses were spread on the floor for our long-delayed lunch. The air was thick with tired silence—but also something warm, something like quiet victory.

Then Salman, the lawyer, broke the quiet with a dramatic groan. He stretched his back like an old man and held up his blistered hands. "You know what?" he announced, voice dripping with fake seriousness, "If I'd known being a lawyer meant digging graves, I would've picked a different career! Look at these hands—I'm clearly a professional hole-maker, not a law-maker!"

The room burst into laughter—loud, unexpected, like sunshine breaking through storm clouds.

I, the corrosion engineer, couldn't resist. "Well," I said, winking, "at least in this job, my clients never complain about my work!"

More laughter. Amir, ever the practical one, smirked. "Maybe you two should switch careers permanently. I think you've found your true calling!"

Mr. Golden walked in, balancing a plate with a mischievous grin. "Kabeer!" he called out to the youngest in the group. "Your wedding's coming up. What's your bride going to say when she finds out you've been digging graves instead of selling cars?"

Kabeer's face turned red. He yanked his dust-covered mask higher. For a heartbeat, he stared at the floor, shoulders shaking with stifled laughter. "Sir, that's exactly why I keep this mask on. She'll never recognize me under all this dirt!"

Another wave of laughter filled the room. For a moment, they weren't professionals stuck in an impossible job—they were just friends, finding joy in the middle of exhaustion.

The chuckles faded slowly, replaced by the creak of tired bodies shifting on mattresses. Then Aadil, always the serious one, brought up a problem. "We're running out of gravestones," he said, frowning. "The roads are blocked. We can't get more."

Mr. Rehan took a slow sip of water. "We'll handle it," he said calmly. "Right now, just eat. You've earned it."

Then, out of nowhere, Kabeer—cheeks still dust-streaked—blurted, "Sir... do you think Ansar and the burial crew will ever come back?"

Silence.

Every head turned. Kabeer's face burned crimson as he realized how that sounded.

"I mean—!" he stammered, waving his hands. He hesitated, fingers brushing the dirt on his knees. "Not that I'm complaining! Working here is... uh... great! It's just... you know, like a dream job..."

The room exploded in laughter again. Kabeer looked like he wanted the ground to swallow him whole.

And in that moment—covered in dirt, sweat, and aching all over—we found something priceless: hope, friendship, and the stubborn ability to laugh even when everything felt heavy.

Small jokes. Silly moments. These were our medicine—the tiny sparks of joy that kept our hearts light, even on the hardest days.





A memorable pandemic photo captures Rehan Golden dining with the graveyard and kitchen teams in the graveyard office, as Aamir Pathology stands on the left, holding a food dish.



16. Operation Gravestone: Barricades Under a Blazing Sun

Seven days. Seven long days with no word from Ansar and the missing Graveyard Team. The air felt thick with worry, like someone had forgotten to turn off the pressure cooker of tension.

"Any news from Ansar?" I asked, trying to sound casual while wiping sweat-dust from my eyebrows.

Aadil shook his head. *"Nothing. It's like they got swallowed by the lockdown."*

Hamza, ever the optimist, grinned weakly. *"Maybe they found a secret snack bunker and are living their best lives eating chips while we suffer."*

And oh, how we suffered.

Meanwhile, I (Faiz), Aadil, Hamza, Amir (the graveyard leader), Aamir (the pathologist), Dr. Ajmal (the dentist), Adnan, and a few other brave (read: foolish) souls found ourselves in the middle of what would later be called **Operation Gravestone**.

(Let's clear something up in our journey: Aamir the pathologist and Amir, our bold graveyard team leader, might sound like twins—just like Fahim and Faheem—but they're entirely different people.)

The Mission: Get special gravestones from a place 3–4 kilometers away.

The Problem: A million barricades blocking all roads.

The Bigger Problem: Mr. Golden was already buried under a lot of tasks. We didn't want to bother him any further.

Amir wiped his face with a dusty sleeve. *"Let's not bother Mr. Golden. We've got this."*

Adnan cracked his knuckles dramatically. *"How hard can carrying a few rocks be?"*

Famous. Last. Words.

Dr. Ajmal smirked. *"Said every patient right before I pull their tooth without anesthesia."*

Aamir groaned. *"Great. We're getting life advice from a dentist now."*

Confident we'd be back in an hour or two, we skipped lunch, thinking we'd eat when we returned. So, the group of ten made a bold choice—to walk to the location, carry the stones back by hand, and call it *"a bit of extra effort."* After all, what could go wrong?

"Who needs food?" I said, patting my growling stomach. *"I'm on the 'see-food' diet—I see food, I eat it. Currently seeing zero food. Perfect."*

At high noon, under the devil's own blowtorch of a sun, we marched off like superheroes.

Spoiler: We were not superheroes.

Reality Check #1: Each stone needed five grown men to carry it.

Reality Check #2: The barricades multiplied like rabbits.

Reality Check #3: The sun was personally offended by us.

Hamza wheezed after ten minutes: *"How... much... farther?"*

"Only 3 kilometers!" I cheered.

Hamza blinked sweat from his eyes. *"Oh good. For a second I thought it might be far."*

By 3 PM, we were:

✔ **Drenched in sweat**

✔ **Starving**

✔ **Thirstier than a camel in a desert**

✔ **Questioning all our life choices**

Aadil tried motivating us: *"Just... push... through..."*

Dr. Ajmal gasped: *"Push through what? Our will to live? Because mine's gone."*

Aamir the pathologist: *"I diagnose us with terminal stupidity."*

Amir the graveyard boss sighed: *"This isn't a workout. It's a work-don't."*

Adnan groaned: *"I don't lift weights. Weights lift me... into an early grave."*

Aamir, the pathologist, groaned. *"Why didn't we think to bring water?"*

"Forget water," Amir grumbled. "I'm starving. We thought we'd be back by lunch. What were we thinking?"

"Thinking?" I laughed weakly. "Bold of you to assume any thinking was involved in this plan."

When we finally arrived at exactly 6:10 PM, we staggered back—disheveled, drained, and looking like survivors of an

apocalypse. Mr. Golden and Town Inspector Chauhan of the Jahangirabad Police Station, deep in conversation, turned to see us... and froze. Their water bottles slipped from their hands, crashing to the ground in sheer disbelief.

Mr. Golden rushed over: *"What in the world is this? — BRING WATER NOW!"*

Hamza croaked: *"Water... mythical liquid... vaguely remember..."*

As we gulped water like dying fish, Amir explained: *"Didn't want to stress you, sir..."*

Mr. Golden shook his head: *"You idiots. You're supposed to ask for help!"*

TI Chauhan couldn't stop laughing: *"You carried stones on foot? Next time just call me—we'll move the barricades! And you can also use our vehicle if you want."*

Adnan glared and said in a slow voice, just loud enough for us to hear, *"Now he tells us."*

And then—despite the blisters, the hunger, the sunburn—we laughed. Big, stupid, exhausted laughs that made our sides hurt (though that might've been from stone-lifting).

Dr. Aamir wiped tears: *"New medical test—make patients carry stones. Survivors are healthy."*

Anas the transcriptionist giggled: *"At least I don't have to file paperwork for this disaster."*

Aamir: *"Title it 'Dumb and Dumber: Rock Edition'."*

I grinned: *"I fight rust, not rocks. But hey—new skill unlocked!"*

Dr. Ajmal: *"Next time I'm bringing dental floss. Stronger than it looks!"*

Aadil: *"Gonna floss the stones into submission, Doc?"*

Our laughter echoed through the graveyard—a weird, wonderful sound among the tombstones. In that moment, we weren't just tired idiots who'd carried rocks all day. We were teammates. The kind who:

Make terrible decisions together

Suffer together

Laugh about it immediately afterward

As we sat there—sticky, smelly, and stupidly proud—I realized something:

"This," I announced, "is the best worst team-building exercise ever. Forget trust falls. From now on, it's Extreme Stone Delivery: Lockdown Edition."

The groans and chuckles that followed? That was the sound of unbreakable friendship—forged in sweat, stupidity, and the shared trauma of carrying rocks across town.

And you know what? **Worth it.**



• Curated By: [Vivek Trivedi](#) • [News18.com](#)

- **Last Updated:** May 13, 2020, 20:19 IST

With 45 fresh cases, Madhya Pradesh's capital Bhopal continues to be a red zone and Jahangirabad continues to be a cause of concern for the administration.

News18 published an article on the severity of COVID in the Jahangirabad area.



17. April 26, 2020: The Day Laughter Died – Buried in a Graveyard Shift

The sun blazed overhead, turning our skin red and soaking our dusty shirts with sweat. For ten long days, our strange little team—doctors, lawyers, engineers, and medical workers—had worked in this quiet graveyard, far from our normal lives.

Every morning, we gripped our shovels with sore, blistered hands, feeling clumsy under the watchful eyes of the tombstones. Our faces showed determination, but also doubt—was this really where we belonged? The sun beat down, making every swing of the shovel ache.

But then there was Aamir, the pathologist, who could make us laugh even in the worst moments. His bright smile never faded, and when the work felt impossible, he'd wiggle his eyebrows and say:

"If I can't diagnose diseases anymore, at least I'll be the best grave-digger in town!"

His joke would break the tension, and suddenly, the work didn't feel so heavy. I'd swing my shovel with fake drama, flexing my arms like a bodybuilder.

"Every shovel swing is rust-proofing my soul!" I'd declare, making everyone snort.

Anas, the medical typist, would lean on his shovel, his fingers—used to keyboards—now covered in blisters. He'd sigh dramatically and say:

"I thought I was good at chopping onions, but this? This is next-level cutting!"

His wink would send us into giggles, even as our backs ached.

Then there was Dr. Ajmal, the dentist, who looked completely out of place. His glasses kept sliding down his sweaty nose, and his once-clean white coat was now covered in dirt. He'd mutter to himself:

"How did I go from fixing teeth to digging graves? Did I take a wrong turn somewhere?"

The past week had been tough. The sun drained us, our muscles burned, and our hands were raw. But when we looked at each other—tired, dirty, but still standing—we didn't need words. A raised eyebrow, a half-smile, a weary chuckle—that was enough.

We weren't just coworkers anymore. We were a family.

The Moment Everything Changed

That date remains vivid in my memory—April 26, 2020, at precisely 5 PM, when something extraordinary occurred.

The graveyard fell silent. No shovels. No heavy breathing. Just stillness.

We huddled together, shoulders touching, faces streaked with dirt.

Aamir's eyes sparkled as he grinned. *"Who knew my pathology skills would help me find the perfect digging spots?"*

I burst out laughing. *"And here I thought I was just rust-proofing my soul!"*

Anas nudged me. *"My fingers were made for typing, not fighting with dirt!"*

Our laughter echoed off the tombstones—bright and alive in this quiet place.

Then—Aadil came running, his arms waving wildly. *"GUESS WHAT? The old team is coming back!"*

We froze. Then—explosions of joy! We jumped, shouted, hugged. Aamir yelled:

"SEE? I TOLD YOU THEY'D COME BACK TOMORROW!"

Anas rolled his eyes. *"You've been saying 'tomorrow' for ten days! Your 'tomorrows' are like New Year's resolutions—never happening!"*

By 8 PM, the old team arrived. Kabeer spotted them first, pointing excitedly. *"LOOK! THEY'RE HERE!"*

Aamir sprinted toward them like a kid spotting ice cream. *"I LOVE YOU, OLD TEAM! I LOVE YOU SO MUCH!"*

Then—chaotic happiness. Aamir grabbed the oldest gravedigger—a thin, kind-faced man—and spun him around like a ragdoll.

The man flailed, laughing. *"PUT ME DOWN! I'M TOO OLD FOR THIS!"*

We roared with laughter, clapping as Aamir finally set him down, both of them dizzy.

Mr. Rehan Golden, our typically strong leader, stood with eyes glistening—unexpected tears of joy betraying his usual composure. He swiped at them roughly, but Aamir caught his wrist before he could finish.

"See how much we missed you?" Aamir said softly.

Aadil, grinning, added: *"Or maybe we're just desperate to stop digging!"*

Another wave of laughter. Even the old gravedigger, still catching his breath, looked confused.

"Do... do we know each other?"

We lost it again, clutching our stomachs.

Aamir, never one to sit still, started dancing like a malfunctioning robot, arms and legs flailing.

"YOU'RE BACK, WE'RE LEAVING—WHAT COULD BE BETTER?"

Mr. Rehan tried to stay stern, but his lips twitched. Then—he laughed. A real, deep, happy laugh.

"Alright, Aamir, enough," he said, but his smile said otherwise.

And just like that, the graveyard—once a place of exhaustion—became a place of joy, friendship, and memories we'd never forget.

One moment, we were laughing—really laughing—the kind that makes your stomach hurt and your eyes water. The air itself seemed to hum with it, like the world had paused to hold its breath.

Then—Aadil's phone rang.

The sound was like a gunshot.

His smile vanished. His whole body went stiff, fingers clutching the phone so tight his knuckles turned white. His lips moved, but no sound came out at first. Then, barely a whisper:

"When? How?"

Silence.

The kind of silence that presses against your chest, making it hard to breathe.

Aadil's voice cracked like thin ice underfoot:

"My dad... he fell. In the kitchen."

Just like that, our happiness shattered.

Mr. Rehan's face—so full of joy just seconds ago—collapsed. Tears, the kind he'd been fighting back all evening, spilled freely down his cheeks. He didn't even try to stop them now.

Aadil turned away, movements sharp and desperate—a son running toward fear instead of away from it. Mr. Rehan lunged after him, grabbing his arm.

"WAIT! Aadil, come with me—"

His scooter roared to life, the sound tearing through the night as they disappeared into the darkness.

The rest of us stood frozen.

We moved without thinking, the celebration dying on our lips. Kabeer's hand—still gritty with grave dirt—gripped my shaking shoulder. I couldn't stop the tears now, each breath coming in ragged gasps.

All I wanted... all I could think... was to see Dad smile again. That crinkled-eye grin when he pretended to be mad at us. To hear him call me *"beta"* one more time. My whole body trembled like a leaf in a storm.

"He'll be okay," Kabeer whispered, but his voice broke on the words.



Part III: The Heart of the Battle



18. The Unbreakable Heart of Irshad Ahmed – A Light That Never Stopped Shining

Even after his fall, even when his legs trembled with every step, even when his body begged for rest—Irshad Ahmed refused to stop. Every step was agony. Every breath was effort. But Irshad Ahmed kept moving forward, his walking stick trembling in his weak grip, his legs shaking beneath him. The community kitchen—the only hope for hundreds of starving families—could not afford to stop. Not for a day. Not even for an hour. And so, though his body screamed in protest, Irshad Ahmed refused to let it fail.

I stood before him, my hands clasped together so tightly that my knuckles turned white. Tears blurred my vision as I begged, ***“Abba, please... just today... just rest today.”*** Aadil stood beside me, his strong shoulders hunched with worry, his eyes silently pleading.

Irshad turned slowly, wincing as pain shot through his body. But then—that smile. That warm, gentle smile that could make the darkest days feel lighter. His calloused hands reached out, one resting on my shoulder, the other on Aadil’s.

“My children,” he whispered, his voice soft but unshakable, ***“Allah tests us in many ways. Right now, He is asking—will we let His children go hungry while we rest? Will we close our eyes while their stomachs ache with emptiness?”***

His walking stick scraped against the ground as he forced himself upright. Each movement was slow, each step a battle—but his spirit? His spirit was unbreakable.

Day after painful day, he came. He watched. He made sure no pot was left unfilled, no hungry person turned away.

We all saw his suffering—me, Aadil, Mr. Rehan Golden, Mr. Farooq—our hearts breaking a little more each time he pushed through the pain. Then came the day Mr. Farooq stumbled out of the storage room, his face ashen, his voice barely above a whisper.

“The flour...” His hands shook as he spoke. ***“Our last supply was 1000 kg. Now... there’s maybe enough for one more day.”***

In those terrible pandemic days, when a bag of flour was worth more than gold, those words hit like a hammer to the chest. Aadil’s strong frame seemed to shrink. Mr. Golden stared at the ground, his mind racing. But Irshad?

His eyes never wavered.

“We will find more,” he said, his voice steady as a mountain.

Mr. Farooq wrung his hands. ***“But, sir... the prices... they’re insane now. The shops in Itwara are charging five times the normal price! And even if we pay...”***

Irshad didn’t let him finish. ***“Aadil,”*** he called softly.

Aadil bent close as Irshad whispered in his ear. I saw my brother’s face change—his eyes widening, his breath catching in his throat.

“Abba... no...” Aadil’s voice cracked. ***“Not that money...”***

Irshad’s smile was peaceful. ***“The money for Hajj... use it all. Feed the people.”***

The air left the room.

Aadil looked like he'd been struck. That money—saved rupee by painful rupee over years—his father's lifelong dream of pilgrimage... now to be spent in a moment?

But Irshad's eyes held no regret. Only certainty.

With trembling hands, Aadil and Mr. Farooq left. Hours later, they returned—not with the 2000 kg we hoped for, but with 7000 kg. The price was criminal. It didn't matter.

Adnan gasped when he saw the mountain of flour sacks. **“How...?”**

Aadil's voice broke as he answered. ***“Abba... he gave his Hajj savings. Every last rupee. He said... ‘If this is my test, I will not fail it. Feed them until the last grain is gone.’”***

Silence fell like a heavy blanket. Tears streamed down every face. But Irshad? He simply nodded, his eyes shining with a quiet joy no words could describe.



The Final Days – A Flame That Refused to Die

Each day, Irshad grew weaker. Each day, his body betrayed him a little more. But his will? His purpose? Those only grew stronger.

When doctors pressed antibiotics into his hands and ordered him to rest, he gently refused. *“There is still work to do,”* he said, his voice hoarse but firm.

Then came the morning he arrived in a wheelchair. His body was failing, but his eyes—oh, his eyes—still burned with divine fire. He rolled himself to Mr. Farooq, leaning forward with effort.

"We need... more hands... for the rotis," he panted, each word costing him dearly. "The lines... are getting longer..."

Mr. Farooq nodded urgently. *"Faiz knows two more workers. We'll bring them in today."*

Before he could finish—

THUD.

Irshad collapsed sideways, his body limp.

"Abba! NO!" Aadil and I screamed, rushing forward, our hands fluttering over his still form like frightened birds.

Rehan came running. Together, we carried Irshad from hospital to hospital, our hope dying a little more with each rejection.

Siddhanta Redcross Super Speciality Hospital, Shivaji Nagar

"No bed available," the receptionist said, barely glancing up. *"Try somewhere else."*

"But he can't breathe!" I pleaded, my voice cracking. *"Just give him oxygen—please!"*

The nurse shook her head. *"No COVID test, no treatment. Rules are rules."*

We stumbled back into the car, Abba's breath growing shallower.

Roshan Hospital, Raisen Road, Govindpura

Same words. Same cold rejection.

"We don't have the facilities," a doctor muttered, turning away as if we were a nuisance.

I clutched Abba's hand, his skin now clammy. *"Just a little longer, Abba..."*

Carewell Hospital, Lal Ghati

"No COVID test, no admission," the nurse said, not even looking up from her desk.

"Please!" I begged, my tears splashing on the counter. *"He's dying! Help him first, test him later!"*

They shut the door in our faces.

Finally—**Hamidia Hospital.**

When we entered, my knees nearly gave way.

There was my father—my strong, vibrant father—now a shadow of himself. His eyes were glassy, his breath came in shallow gasps. It was as if half of him had already left this world.

"Abba..." I choked out, guiding his wheelchair with shaking hands. *"Hold on... please hold on..."*

The ICU allowed only one attendant. I stayed.

As a worker slowly pushed his wheelchair toward a bed, I noticed doctors lounging in the corner—some scrolling on their phones, others chatting as if this was just another day.

"Please!" I cried, my voice raw with desperation. *"My father needs oxygen now! Look at him!"*

One doctor glanced up briefly. *"Wait your turn."*

Thirty agonizing minutes passed.

Abba's lips were turning blue. In panic, I grabbed our oxygen meter and rushed to a doctor.

"Look!" I shoved the numbers in his face. *"His oxygen is crashing! Just give him a mask!"*

The doctor sighed. *"My shift ended ten minutes ago. The next doctor will handle it."*

A nearby nurse smirked. *"Government hospital, beta. What do you expect?"*

Their indifference crushed me. Was my father's life—a life spent saving others—worth nothing to them?

With shaking hands, I started recording. *"This is Irshad Ahmed,"* I sobbed into my phone. *"A man who fed thousands... now left to die because no one will help him!"*

Finally—**finally**—a doctor ambled over. With infuriating slowness, he connected the oxygen.

That endless day—**May 1st, 2020**—passed in a haze of whispered prayers and silent screams.

These images were taken from the original video.



The nurse (left) said, "I am a government employee," and the doctor (right) said, "His shift is over now."

The Last Moments – A Promise Etched in Tears

3 AM, May 3rd. Aadil sat outside the ICU, his head in his hands, his entire world collapsing.

When a nurse called him in for medicine, he seized his chance—not for paperwork, but for one last look at his hero.

What he saw would haunt him forever.

Irshad lay still, his breathing barely there, his face pale as the moon. But his eyes—when they fluttered open, they held a light no illness could dim.

No words passed between them. None were needed.

That slight twitch of his lips. That loving gaze.

The message was as clear as sunlight:

"Don't stop. Keep feeding them. This is our duty."

Tears poured down Aadil's face as he whispered his vow:

"I won't stop, Abba. I promise."

At **8 AM**—the world shattered.

"He's gone."

Two words. That's all it took to destroy our universe.

Aadil's anguished scream echoed through the sterile halls—a sound of pure, primal loss. When he called me, his voice was barely human:

"Come... it's Abba... he's... gone..."

I ran as if the devil were at my heels. My heart pounded so hard I thought it would burst.

When I arrived, Aadil collapsed into my arms—this strong man now reduced to a sobbing child.

"He left us... he's really gone..."

The pain was physical. It hurt to breathe. To think. The man who had been our rock, our compass, our light—was gone.

No more warm hugs. No more wise words.

The world suddenly felt empty—like a house with all the lights turned off.



NOTE -A Life Lost to Delay

Irshad Ahmed fought for his life, but the system failed him. Hospital after hospital turned him away, refusing to admit him out of fear that he *might* have COVID. "Only with a negative test," they said—as if his suffering could wait.

With each passing hour, his condition worsened. By the time he was finally admitted, it was too late. His COVID test was taken, but death arrived before the results. And when the report finally came? **Negative.**

He didn't die from the virus. He died from neglect, from hesitation, from a cruel delay that stole his last chance. **A life ended. A family shattered. All for nothing.**

We failed him.



The Final Farewell – A Legacy Written in Love

News spread like wildfire. In the middle of strict lockdown, hundreds gathered outside, desperate to say goodbye.

Rehan, his eyes red from crying, addressed the crowd: *"Irshad spent his life protecting people. Would he want you risking your health now?"*

A voice shouted back: *"But he deserves to be honored!"*

Rehan. *"Then honor him by living as he did—with courage, with compassion."*

On **May 3rd**, under a gentle afternoon sun, we laid Irshad Ahmed to rest. The graveyard was nearly empty due to restrictions, but the quiet felt right—as if the world were holding its breath in respect.

As they lowered his wrapped body, my hands shook violently. I reached for a handful of earth—but couldn't make my fingers open.

Aadil's whisper broke through my grief: *"Let him go, brother... he's at peace now."*

The dirt fell from my hand with a soft thud—the finality of that sound shattered me completely.

More handfuls followed—Aadil, Mr. Farooq, the few allowed to attend—each clump of earth a goodbye.

When it was done, we stood frozen—unable to leave, unable to accept that such a large heart now lay beneath such a small mound.

Mr. Farooq began reciting Surah Fatiha, his voice breaking with every word. The familiar verses were the only thing holding us together.

As we walked back, the streets were silent—no honking cars, no shouting vendors—as if the city itself were mourning.

An elderly woman called from her balcony, tears streaming down her wrinkled face:

"Your father fed my grandchildren when they were starving... May Allah give him the highest place in Paradise."

Aadil and I stood outside the kitchen—the place Irshad had loved more than life itself—our tears mixing with the dust at our feet.

Mr. Farooq placed a gentle hand on our shoulders. *"Go home. Rest."*

Aadil's response was barely audible:

"My father worked until his last breath... How can I rest when his work isn't done?"

Rehan arrived, urging Aadil and me to check on our mother—now lost in her own ocean of grief.

The kitchen staff, the volunteers, the countless families Irshad had fed—all moved through the days like ghosts, lost without their guiding light.

But here's the miracle—

Though Irshad was gone, his light never dimmed.

It lived on in every roti rolled.

In every hungry child fed.

In every act of kindness done in his name.

Irshad Ahmed's heart was truly unbreakable.

Because a love that pure?

A sacrifice that deep?

That never really dies.

It simply changes form—from a beating heart to an eternal flame, warming the world long after its keeper is gone.

And that flame?

It burns brighter with every life touched,

with every hunger satisfied,
with every act of love carried forward.
That is Irshad Ahmed's true legacy—
Not just a memory,
but a movement.





19. A Father's Love: The Unbreakable Legacy of Irshad Ahmed

The morning after Irshad Ahmed left this world, the sun rose as it always did—but for those who loved him, the light felt dimmer, the air heavier. His absence was a wound too deep for words. Mr. Rehan Golden, our family, and our entire team moved through the day like shadows, our hearts shattered. We were like orphans, lost without our guiding star.

But as Nelson Mandela once said, “*The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.*” And rise we must—because Irshad had taught us that. No matter how broken we felt, his words echoed in our souls: “*The greatest duty in the eyes of Allah is to serve humanity.*”

So, on the morning of May 4th, we gathered what little strength we had left and returned to the kitchen. The work had to continue. The poor still needed to be fed.

The Tea and Toast That Held a Lifetime of Love

Before the sun could wake the world, we began our work—filling thermoses with hot tea, packing toast into boxes. Aadil’s hands moved, but his heart was far away, lost in memories sweeter than sugar.

He could still see it—those golden afternoons after school. Dragging his tired legs home, his schoolbag heavy on his small

shoulders. But no matter how tired he was, one sound always made his heart jump:

“Bachho, chai aur bread ka time hogaya!” (“Children, it’s time for tea and bread!”)

There he was—Abba. Standing in the doorway, his smile brighter than the sun. He would butter each piece of bread with so much love, as if it were a gift.

“This one is for Aadil,” he’d say, handing him the warm slice. *“This one is for Faiz. This one is for Anas.”*

Then he would sit with them, his eyes soft, listening as they talked. If one of them had a bad day, Abba would just smile and say, *“Beta, bad days are better than good days. Because bad days teach you what good days never can.”*

Now, as Aadil packed the toast, his fingers shook. The memories wrapped around him like a hug he could no longer feel.

“Why did you leave me, Abba?” His voice was a whisper, cracking like dry earth. *“Who will call me for bread and butter now? Who will ask me about my day like you did?”*

A tear fell. Then another. *“Please... come back.”*

But the kitchen stayed silent.

No answer came.

Only the echo of a love that once was.

The Cries Behind the Bathroom Door

By 7:30 AM, we were almost ready to begin distribution. But something was wrong.

Mr. Farooq had gone to the washroom and noticed—the door had been locked for too long. A cold worry settled in his chest. He hurried back to the others.

“Who’s been in the washroom all this time?” he asked.

We looked around.

Aadil was missing.

A thick silence filled the air as we moved toward the bathroom. And then—we heard it. The sound of a heart breaking. Quiet, choked sobs from behind the door.

Farooq’s breath caught. *“He’s crying,”* he whispered, as if saying it louder would make it more real.

He knocked softly. *“Aadil? Beta... please open the door.”*

No answer. Just the sound of a son drowning in grief.

Minutes passed like hours. Then—the door opened.

The moment Aadil saw Farooq, his legs gave way. He fell into Farooq’s arms, shaking, his cries tearing through the hallway.

“Abba left me,” he gasped, his voice shattered. *“Why did he go? Why didn’t he take me with him?”*

Farooq held him like he was the only thing keeping him from crumbling. Tears burned in his own eyes, but he swallowed them down. *“Aadil... you must be strong,”* he whispered. *“Remember what your Abba used to say? ‘To serve others is to serve Allah.’ If you fall apart... who will carry his light?”*

Aadil clung to him, his tears soaking Farooq’s shirt. For a long time, he didn’t move.

Then—slowly—the words found their way into his heart.

His father was gone.

But his love wasn’t.

And neither was his work.

The Strength Left Behind

What Remains

Irshad left. Pain drowned us.

But—

His shadow sat in the empty chair.

His laugh boiled in the kettle.

His grin lived in every meal.

We marched.

Not from courage—

he burned the path.

His hands kneaded each roti. His voice urged, “*Eat, beta.*”

His heart beat in our hands.

Men like him?

Never leave.

Became bread’s heat. Became lifted hands. Became night’s last light.

Love stays. **He stays.**



For His Father’s Memory: Aadil’s Dangerous Hospital Sting That Exposed Deadly Neglect

The evening was quiet—too quiet. The kind of silence that makes the air feel heavy, like the world itself is holding its

breath. We sat in Rehan Golden's office, the weight of Irshad Ahmed's absence pressing down on all of us. Days had passed since his death, but the grief was still fresh, still raw.

Aadil, usually the loudest among us, the one who filled every silence with laughter, sat motionless. His shoulders slumped forward, his fingers nervously twisting the edge of his shirt. His eyes, once bright with mischief, were now empty, fixed on the floor as if searching for something he knew he'd never find. He barely spoke. Every word seemed to cost him, as if speaking made the pain more real.

Aamir, sensing the suffocating sadness in the room, cleared his throat and forced a smile. His voice was light, but his eyes were nervous.

"Remember," he began, his lips twitching, "that time we begged Mayank for a treat, and he finally took us to that restaurant?"

He paused, eyes twinkling. *"But when the bill came—" He slapped his forehead dramatically, mimicking Mayank's voice, "—Oh no, guys! I forgot my wallet at home!"*

Laughter burst through the room. Everyone remembered—Mayank's wide, innocent eyes, the way he shrugged like it was just bad luck. Even Ankit chuckled, shaking his head. But Aadil didn't move. His fingers tightened around the armrest of his chair, his jaw clenched.

Ankit nudged him gently. *"Hey... you okay?"*

Aadil didn't answer. His breathing was shallow, his gaze lost somewhere far away.

Mayank, always the one to keep the mood alive, jumped in. *"Oh, but Aamir is worse!" He pointed at him, grinning. "Remember when he invited us to Khan Sahab's for biryani to celebrate his new pathology lab? But when the bill came,"*

Mayank continued, standing up for effect, *“where was Aamir? Gone! Vanished! He ran home!”*

Aamir laughed, raising his hands in surrender. *“Hey! I had an emergency! My mom was sick!”*

Ankit rolled his eyes. *“Yeah, right! Your ‘emergencies’ always happen when it’s time to pay!”*

The room erupted in laughter again. But Aadil? Nothing. His silence was louder than all the jokes in the world.

Then, Faheem sighed. He took off his glasses, rubbing his tired eyes. His voice dropped low, serious.

“You know... in government hospitals, patients are treated like animals.” He shook his head. *“There was an old man from Ashoka Garden... went to Hamidia Hospital. For two days, he lay on the cold floor, waiting for a bed.”* His voice cracked. *“And then... he died. Just like that. No one even noticed.”*

Aadil’s head snapped up. His eyes burned—suddenly alive, suddenly furious.

“When?” His voice was rough, like he hadn’t spoken in years. *“When did this happen?”*

Faheem blinked, surprised by the intensity. *“Last week. Tuesday. The man had chest pain. His son brought him in, but they said no beds. He just... lay there. On the floor. Until he stopped breathing.”*

Aadil’s hands shook. His knuckles turned white from gripping the chair. Then—

BANG!

His fist slammed onto the table. Coffee cups rattled.

“This is not right.” His voice trembled—not with sadness, but with rage. *“This is exactly what killed my father!”*

The room went silent.

Mayank leaned forward, speaking softly. *"Aadil... I know it hurts. But we can't change the system. It's too big. Too broken."*

Aadil stood so fast his chair screeched. His eyes were wild, his chest heaving.

"No!" His voice broke. *"Just because we can't fix everything doesn't mean we shouldn't try! My father—"* His breath hitched. *"My father died because of their neglect. And now another man is dead too."*

He pointed at the door, as if the hospital was right outside. *"I won't let this keep happening. Not one more person. Not one more family."*

No one spoke. We had never seen Aadil like this—grief turned into fire, pain turned into purpose.

"I'm going to expose them," he said, tears streaming down his face. *"I'll show the world what's happening inside those walls."*

Aamir stood, gripping his shoulder. *"Okay... okay. We'll make a plan. We'll be smart."*

Mayank nodded nervously. *"But Hamidia is powerful, Aadil. They can crush us."*

Aadil wasn't listening. When Aamir mentioned taking a month to plan, he exploded.

"A month?!" His voice shook the room. *"In a month, how many more will die? How many more families will be broken like mine? NO. We act now."*

We all stared. This wasn't just anger. This was a son's love, a son's grief, screaming to be heard.

The Hospital – First Attempt

The next day, Aadil marched into Hamidia Hospital, camera in hand. Aamir and Mayank followed, tense, scared.

Aadil filmed everything—patients on the floor, moaning in pain. Old men, weak women, children—left like trash in the corridors. His hands shook, but his voice was steady.

Then—shouting.

Hospital staff surrounded them, furious. *“You can’t film here!”*

A tall man snatched the camera. *“This is hospital property now!”*

A heated argument erupted, voices rising as both sides reached their boiling points.

“People are dying on your floors!” Aadil shouted, his face inches from the staff member’s. *“My father died because of your negligence!”*

“Get out before we call security!” threatened the man, pushing Aadil back roughly.

Tension hung thick in the air, and it seemed like a physical fight would break out at any moment. Aamir and Mayank had to physically pull Aadil away, dragging him by the arms as he continued to shout back at the staff.

“This isn’t over!” Aadil yelled, struggling against his friends’ grip. *“People will know the truth!”*

Once outside, Mayank tried to reason with him. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he placed both hands on Aadil’s shoulders, forcing him to make eye contact.

The Second Attempt – Aadil’s Resolve

Panting, Aadil wiped his face. His friends begged him to leave.

Mayank gripped his shoulders. *"Please, brother. Your uncle has responsibilities. Your father's last wish was for you to serve humanity—but not like this. Not if it gets you killed."*

Aadil's fists clenched. *"Serving humanity means exposing this. If we save even one life...isn't it worth it?"*

Before they could stop him, he turned—and walked away.

He didn't go home.

Instead, he circled the hospital, slipping in through a side entrance they hadn't guarded. His phone was hidden in his palm, recording.

This time, he saw worse.

An old woman, skin stretched over bones, lay curled on the floor. Her fingers trembled as she reached for him.

"Water... please..."

Tears blurred his vision as he knelt beside her, helping her sip from a cup. *"How long have you been here?"*

"Three days," she whispered.

His heart shattered.

He filmed it all—the neglect, the suffering. Every second burned into his soul.

Aadil felt his heart breaking all over again. In a whisper, barely audible, he said, *"For you, Dad. For humanity."* He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat.

"Allah ke nazdeek, sabse azeem farz khidmat-e-khalq... the greatest duty in the eyes of Allah is to serve humanity."

For a moment, as he helped the woman settle back more comfortably, he felt his father's presence beside him, a warm hand on his shoulder, guiding him. The sensation was so real

that he turned, half-expecting to see his father standing there with that kind smile that had always made everything better.

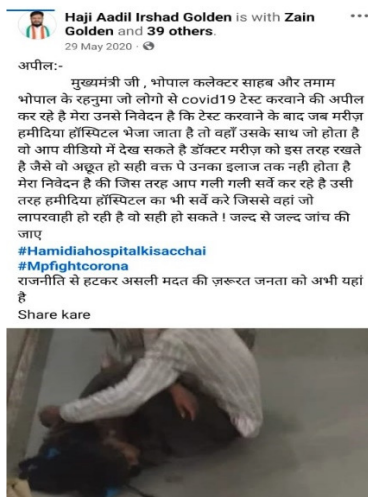
The Aftermath

The video spread like fire. Thousands saw it. Thousands were angry.

That night, Aadil sat alone, tears falling freely. But this time—they weren't just tears of grief.

They were tears of hope.

He looked up, whispering to the sky: “Dad... I hope I made you proud.”



In a Facebook video, Aadil appeals to authorities about harsh conditions at Hamidia Hospital—patients lying on floors for days, struggling for admission, and receiving inadequate care. He criticizes doctors treating them as untouchable and calls for immediate action.





One memorable photo shows Aadil with his father, Irshad Ahmed, taken just before the lockdown.



20. As the Sun Rose, He Collapsed—Until ‘The Address, Ashok’ Dragged Him Back into the Fire

Two weeks had passed since Irshad Ahmed left this world, but for Rehan Golden, the pain was as fresh as the moment he had lost him. Every morning, waking up felt like lifting a mountain. The simplest tasks—buying flour, counting money, even breathing—felt impossible without his brother.

The price of flour had risen like a cruel joke, mocking their struggle. Rehan clenched his fists, staring at the empty kitchen shelves. His hands trembled as he reached for his brother's photo. The frame was cold against his fingers.

"Irshad Bhai..." His throat tightened.

Irshad had been more than a brother. He had been Rehan's shield, his voice of reason, the one who carried him through every storm. Now, the world felt too big, too loud, too empty.

That evening, a whisper of hope reached them—a seller in Raisen district had flour at a fair price.

"We should go," Rehan said, his voice rough from sleepless nights. *"Tonight."*

Farooq, his kitchen team leader, frowned. *"Rehan Bhai, you haven't slept in days. Let me go instead."*

"No." Rehan's answer was firm. *"I have to do this."*

The others exchanged glances. They understood. This wasn't just about flour. This was about Irshad.

The Journey to Raisen

The van moved through silent streets, the lockdown making the world feel like a ghost town. Rehan stared out the window, memories flooding his mind.

"Do you remember..." he whispered, not caring if anyone heard, *"...how Irshad Bhai always protected me?"*

A faint smile touched his lips.

"Once, I broke Ammi's favorite vase. I was so scared..."

He could still see Irshad's kind eyes, the way he had swept up the broken pieces without hesitation.

"Don't worry, chotu," Irshad had said, ruffling his hair. *"I'll tell Ammi it was me. Just be careful next time, okay?"*

Rehan swallowed hard. His fingers curled into fists.

Then another memory—walking to the market as a child, his tiny hand wrapped around Irshad's rough, calloused finger.

"Hold tight, Rehan," Irshad would say, swinging their arms playfully. *"As long as we're together, nothing can harm you."*

Now, there was no one to hold on to.

Tears blurred his vision. One fell, then another. He didn't wipe them away.

Farooq noticed. He hesitated, then gently squeezed Rehan's arm.

"He would be proud of you, Bhai," he said softly.

Rehan nodded, unable to speak. His shoulders shook.

No one else dared to break the silence. They knew—this pain was different. Irshad hadn't just been Rehan's brother. He had been his light.

The Return

By the time they reached Raisen, exhaustion clung to Rehan like a second skin. His eyes were swollen, his movements slow. But he pushed forward.

The seller studied his tired face. *"You're doing God's work,"* he said quietly. *"Your brother... he must have been a good man."*

Rehan's breath hitched. *"How did you know about him?"*

"News travels fast," the man replied. *"Your work—feeding people, burying the dead... it reaches even small towns like ours."* He looked away, voice breaking. *"I lost my father last month. This sickness... it takes and takes."*

Rehan reached out, clasping the man's hand. *"May Allah grant them both the highest place in Jannat."*

"Ameen."

They returned to Bhopal as the sun rose, the city still asleep. Rehan's body screamed for rest. At the community kitchen, he collapsed onto the sofa.

"Just ten minutes..." he mumbled, closing his eyes.

For the first time in days, he let himself feel—the crushing loneliness, the unbearable ache.

"What would you do, Bhai?" he whispered into the emptiness. *"Guide me..."*

Then—his phone rang.

He jolted awake, fumbling for it.

"Rehan Bhai?" Ashok's voice was urgent, trembling with desperation. *"A woman has passed... but no one will take her to the shamshaan (crematorium). Her family is too afraid."*

Rehan's body ached, his soul heavy with exhaustion—yet he sat up, gripping the phone like a lifeline. *"Where?"* His voice was steel wrapped in fatigue.

"Bhai... you sound exhausted—" Ashok hesitated, fear lacing his words.

"The address, Ashok." Rehan's command left no room for debate.

A pause. Then, the location.

Rehan's hands shook as he tied his shoes, his muscles screaming in protest. When he stood, his legs nearly gave way—but he clenched his jaw, forcing himself upright.

Farooq rushed to his side, eyes wide with fear. *"Rehan Bhai, you can't go like this! You'll collapse!"*

Rehan turned to him, his gaze unwavering, burning with quiet resolve. *"If not me, then who?"*

"But Irshad Bhai—" Farooq's voice cracked.

"—would have gone," Rehan finished softly, his voice carrying the weight of a thousand unspoken vows. *"I'll rest... after."*

He splashed cold water on his face, staring at his reflection—hollow cheeks, bloodshot eyes, grief carved into every line. Yet, beneath the weariness, something unbreakable remained.

Then, he straightened his shoulders, as if hearing a voice only he could hear.

"Stand tall, chotu." Irshad's words echoed in his heart, a whisper of courage. *"When you serve others, you stand before*

Allah." (Note: "*Chotu*" is an affectionate term often used for a younger brother.)

Because as long as he kept serving, as long as he carried the light of compassion into the darkness—Irshad would never truly be gone.

Rehan took a deep breath, his spirit rising above the pain. "*Let's go.*"

Farooq's fingers dug into Rehan's arm, desperate. "*Rehan Bhai... your mask! You forgot it!*"

Rehan stopped. For a moment, the weight of the world pressed down on his shoulders. Then, slowly, he turned. His smile was tired but unshaken. "*No, Farooq. I didn't forget.*"

Farooq's breath hitched. "*But—without it, you'll get sick! You could...*" His voice cracked. "*You could die.*"

Rehan's hand settled on Farooq's shoulder, steady as stone. His eyes burned—not with anger, but with something deeper. "*Then I will die.*" A pause. The words hung in the air, heavy with meaning. "*Some truths... they need proof. Not words. Not promises. Blood. Sacrifice.*" He exhaled, voice softer now, but firmer. "*If my life is the price to remind this world what humanity means? Then I pay it gladly.*"

Farooq stared, tears brimming. "*But—*"

Rehan shook his head. "*Fear makes men selfish. Love makes them brave. Today... I choose love.*"

And with that, he turned away. No grand speeches. No looking back. Just a man, broken but unbroken, walking into the storm—not because he had no fear, but because he had something stronger.

Hope.

NOTE - From that day on, Rehan was often seen walking without a mask—not out of carelessness, but by choice. When questioned, his answer never wavered: "If we hide our humanity to stay safe, what exactly are we saving?"

His actions were divisive. Doctors called it suicide, the poor called it hope. The fearful looked away, but the brave found inspiration. Slowly, people began to admire humanity over fear.

They whispered, "Even without a mask, he reached out to a stranger. Yet even with one—how could we ever turn away from those we love?"



Mr. Golden stands on the left while a reporter covers the dangers of Jahangirabad, the most hazardous COVID area in Bhopal.



Beyond Religion, Beyond Fear: Police Tears as Humanity Rewrote History

The streets of Jahangirabad, near Shabban Chauraha, lay silent—emptied by fear, abandoned by the living. The lockdown had swept through like a storm, leaving only a handful of police officers standing watch. Outside a small, crumbling house, a group of 15 to 20 people stood apart, their

heads bowed, their hearts heavy. They shifted uneasily, eyes darting, afraid to touch, afraid to breathe too close.

A funeral van waited nearby, its engine humming softly, impatient. The driver paced, wiping sweat from his brow despite the cool air. His hands trembled as he checked his watch again and again. Time was slipping away. He turned to the crowd, his voice breaking.

"Please!" he begged. "We have to take her now! There's no more time!"

No one moved.

A whisper slithered through the group: "The virus..."

Another voice, weaker, guilty: "She was one of us... but what can we do?"

Fear had paralyzed them. It clung to their skin, heavier than the masks on their faces.

Nearby, the police officers adjusted their gloves, their own fear barely hidden. One muttered to another, "This is the third one today."

The driver's voice cracked with desperation. "Someone—anyone—help!"

Then—

A murmur. A shift in the air.

One officer straightened, his eyes lighting up. "Look! It's Rehan Golden and his team!"

A ripple of relief passed through the crowd. Shoulders relaxed. Heads lifted.

"Rehan is here."

But police officers and people stood frozen in shock. There he was, leading his team, unmasked while every other man behind him wore protection. Yet with each step, Rehan radiated a courage beyond words—a fearless calm that steadied trembling hearts.

Like the first light breaking through darkness, he walked forward, four loyal men at his back. They were ordinary men, but in this moment, their bravery made them giants. The crowd fell silent, then slowly, respectfully, parted—making way for these unspoken heroes.

Rehan's eyes were tired, shadowed by endless nights of loss. But beneath the exhaustion burned something unbreakable—a fire that fear could not extinguish. He paused at the doorway, looking at the body inside—a woman, abandoned in death by those who had loved her in life.

An old man stepped forward, wringing his hands. "Mr. Golden," he stammered, "we... we can't touch her. You understand, don't you? The virus... our families..."

Rehan turned. His voice was soft, but his words cut deep.

"Dangerous?" he asked. "More dangerous than leaving a mother, a sister, alone like this?" He gestured to the house. "What if this was your mother? Your daughter? Would you let her lie here, forgotten?"

The old man looked down, shame flooding his face.

"Let them do it," another relative muttered. "They're used to this."

Rehan didn't argue. He simply glanced at his team—his brothers in spirit. No words were needed. Together, they stepped forward.

With gentle hands, they lifted the woman's body, covering her with dignity, treating her as they would their own. The crowd watched, stunned into silence. A woman pressed her hands to her mouth, tears spilling down her cheeks.

A police officer, his voice thick with emotion, stepped forward. "Mr. Rehan... how do you do this? Day after day?"

Rehan paused, adjusting his grip. Sweat rolled down his temple, but his voice never wavered.

"Because someone must," he said. "My brother Irshad taught me that serving humanity is the greatest worship. He used to say, 'In death, there is no Hindu, no Muslim—only souls returning home.' Every soul deserves dignity."

The officer nodded, tears in his eyes. He pulled out his phone. "People need to see this. They need to remember what courage looks like."

As Rehan and his team carried the woman to the van, their steps were slow, deliberate. The weight was more than physical—it was the weight of a thousand unspoken griefs. But they carried it anyway.

One of the relatives finally found his voice. "Thank you," he whispered, choking on the words. "For doing what we couldn't."

Rehan didn't answer. He only nodded, his own eyes glistening.

In that moment, he thought of Irshad—his brother, his protector, his guiding light. The brother who had been taken by cruel negligence, who had taught him that love is not just a feeling—it is an action.

As the van drove away, Rehan stood still, letting the grief wash over him. He could almost hear Irshad's voice: "Keep going, little brother. The world needs you now."

Mr. Farooq, who had known them both, placed a hand on Rehan's shoulder. No words were needed.

"He would be proud," Farooq said softly.

Rehan took a deep breath, wiped his face, and turned to his team.

"Let's go," he said. "There are others waiting."

The police recordings of that day would soon touch millions. A Muslim man and his team, carrying a Hindu woman—not because of religion, but because of something far greater.

This was Rehan Golden—a man who, even in his own unbearable pain, kept walking forward.

Proving that in the darkest times, humanity does not die—it rises.



Rehan Golden is wearing a white kurta pyjama and is positioned at the front left.



Rehan Golden and the Golden Team after respectfully placing the body in the ambulance.



Mr. Golden is conversing with the police.





21. Whispers to Roars: Rehan Golden, a Brother's Fall, and Bhopal's COVID Revolution

The Golden Office felt hollow without Irshad Ahmed. The air was thick with silence, heavy with loss. At the head of the table, Mr. Rehan Golden sat, his hands trembling as he shuffled papers. His red-rimmed eyes told a story of sleepless nights, of grief barely held back. The empty chair beside him—Irshad's chair—stood like a ghost.

We took our seats, the plastic chairs creaking under us. No one spoke. The only sound was the slow, painful tick of the wall clock, counting seconds we all wished we could take back.

Then Mr. Golden stood. His chest rose with a deep, shaky breath before he spoke.

"Friends..."

His voice cracked. He swallowed hard, gripping the edge of the table like it was the only thing holding him up.

"Friends," he tried again, stronger this time, *"we have a problem. A terrible problem."*

His eyes moved slowly over each of us—Javed, Majid, Sudeep, me and others. His gaze lingered on Irshad's empty seat before he forced himself to continue.

“In the Old City... in Jahangirabad... people are too afraid to get tested for COVID.”

A cold weight settled in my chest.

“The government set up testing centers,” he said, his voice rough with emotion, “but no one comes. No tests mean no treatment. No treatment means...”

He didn’t finish. He didn’t have to.

Javed, always the one to crack a joke, sat stone-faced, his fingers digging into his knees. Majid wrung his hands like he was trying to wash away fear.

“Sir,” Javed said quietly, “people are terrified. The rumors they hear from neighbors are worse than anything on TV. They think the test itself will kill them.”

Majid nodded fast. *“My own cousin refused. He has every symptom—fever, cough, struggling to breathe—but he said, ‘If I die, I die at home. Not in some government hellhole.’”*

My throat tightened. *“And it’s not just fear of the test,” I added. “People are scared of what happens after. If they test positive, they’re taken away. No one knows where. No one knows if they’ll ever come back.”*

Sudeep’s voice was barely a whisper. *“And the shame... if a family gets marked, no one will sell them food. No one will speak to them. They’ll be treated like lepers.”*

Mr. Golden listened, his face crumbling for just a second before he pulled himself together. He raised a hand, and we fell silent.

“I know it’s hard,” he said, his voice breaking. “But we have to make them understand. Lives are at stake.”

His eyes flicked again to Irshad’s chair. A single tear rolled down his cheek. He didn’t wipe it away.

Then—suddenly—his back straightened. His jaw set.

“In three days,” he announced, his voice strong now, “we will hold a free COVID test camp. Right here. In front of the Golden Office.”

A nervous ripple went through us.

“Sir,” Mr. Farooq said carefully, “what if... no one comes?”

Mr. Golden’s fist came down on the table—not in anger, but in fire.

“They will come.”

His eyes burned into us. *“Spread the word. Everywhere. At tea distributions, at meals, on every street corner. Tell them they matter. Tell them...”* His voice caught. *“Tell them about Irshad. Tell them we can’t lose anyone else.”*

By 4 PM on test day, our hearts were pounding, our breaths shallow.

The air was thick with fear, with doubt. We stood outside the Golden Office, eyes glued to the empty street, praying for just one person—just one—to show up. The doctors waited in their white coats, their testing kits neatly laid out, untouched. Not a single soul had come. Every second that passed was like a hammer striking our hearts, each beat heavier than the last.

Majid paced like a caged animal, his fingers trembling as he bit his nails. His voice was a broken whisper. *“I don’t think anyone’s coming... We’ve failed.”* The words cut deep, because deep down, we all feared the same.

Mr. Farooq, though his own hands were unsteady, placed a firm grip on Majid’s shoulder. *“Mr. Golden believes they will come,”* he said, his voice quiet but strong. *“We have to trust him.”*

Sudeep leaned against the wall, arms locked across his chest, his foot tapping like a ticking bomb. *"I want to believe... but it feels like we're just waiting for disappointment."* He glanced at his watch, his face darkening. *"It's been half an hour already."*

Then the policeman stepped forward, his jaw tight, his voice sharp with frustration. *"It's impossible,"* he said, shaking his head. *"We've tried this four times in different neighborhoods. Every single one failed. The people here won't step out. Not for this."*

A doctor sighed, rubbing his tired eyes. *"He's right. In Jahangirabad, fear runs too deep. No one's coming. This is pointless."*

Javed grabbed my arm, his fingers digging into my skin, his face pale as death. *"Faiz..."* His voice was a dry rasp, his eyes wide with terror. *"What if no one comes?"*

The silence was suffocating. The absence of Irshad—his voice, his strength—was like a hole in the world. Mr. Golden was barely holding on, drowning in his brother's unfinished mission. Every breath he took was a fight. Every step forward was a battle. But if this failed... it wouldn't just break him. It would erase the last pieces of the man he once was.

My throat tightened, fear clawing at my chest. But I stood straighter, forcing the words out. *"Javed, no matter what happens... we did the right thing. We tried. That's what counts. That's what Mr. Irshad would have wanted."*

Mr. Farooq heard me and placed a warm hand on my shoulder. His eyes were kind, but so, so tired. *"Very true, Faiz,"* he said softly. *"Sometimes, all we can do is try."*

The doctors whispered among themselves. A young woman threw her hands up in defeat. *"We told you this would happen,"*

she said, her voice hollow. *"It's been over an hour. No one's coming. We should go where people actually want our help."*

The tension was unbearable. Doctors began packing up. Police officers checked their watches, ready to leave. Hope was slipping through our fingers.

Then—

Mr. Golden stepped forward.

He moved slowly, deliberately, his back straight, his head high. His voice, when he spoke, cut through the doubt like a blade.

"No."

Everyone froze.

"You still have three hours left," he said, pointing to his watch. *"You're not leaving yet."*

The young doctor opened her mouth to argue, but Mr. Golden raised his hand—gentle, but unshakable.

"Patience," he said, his eyes burning with something fierce, something unbreakable. *"We will wait."*

His certainty was like a fire in the dark. It made us stand taller. It made us believe.

"But sir," a doctor said weakly, *"what if—"*

"There are no what-ifs," Mr. Golden interrupted—his voice soft but iron-strong. *"There is only waiting. And faith."*

So we waited. Hearts pounding. Eyes fixed on the empty street. The sun dipped lower, painting the road in gold. A breeze whispered through, cooling our sweat-damp skin. People passed by—glanced, hesitated, then hurried away.

The tension grew. Majid paced. Javed checked his phone again and again, as if willing a miracle to appear. Sudeep stared at the ground, jaw clenched.

Then—

Mr. Golden turned to us, a quiet smile on his face.

“While we wait,” he said, calm as still water, “why don’t we all get tested ourselves? Let’s show them there’s nothing to fear.”

We looked at each other, uncertain—but we nodded.

“I’ll go first,” I said, stepping forward before I could think twice. My voice didn’t shake.

The doctor approached with the swab. I flinched.

“It won’t hurt much,” she assured me, her earlier frustration gone. *“Just a quick swab inside each nostril. Close your eyes if it helps.”*

I closed my eyes. A quick pinch—uncomfortable, but nothing like the horror stories we’d heard.

“That’s it?” I blinked.

The doctor smiled. *“That’s it. Not so terrible, right?”*

“Not at all,” I said, turning to the others. *“It’s nothing to be afraid of. Really.”*

One by one, we stepped forward—volunteers, police, even Mr. Golden himself. And as we did, something shifted. The fear loosened its grip. The tension eased.

Because we were doing something.

Because we were proving it could be done.

Mr. Golden looked at us, his eyes warm with pride. *“See?”* he said. *“Quick. Simple. And it could save lives.”*

A Miracle on the Street of Hope

Then—just when our hearts were heavy with doubt—movement flickered at the end of the street.

Four women.

Their faces half-hidden behind bright scarves and masks, their steps slow and uncertain. They glanced around, shoulders tense, as if expecting someone to shout at them to turn back.

Sudeep gasped, his whole-body straightening. *“Look!”* he whispered, pointing with trembling fingers. *“People—they’re actually coming!”*

We froze, afraid to even breathe too loud. Afraid they might vanish like a mirage.

The doctors snapped to attention, quickly arranging their kits, their earlier frustration forgotten.

And then—Mr. Golden stepped forward.

His face softened, his eyes crinkling with warmth. He bowed slightly, his voice gentle as morning light. *“Thank you for coming,”* he said. *“You are very, very brave.”*

The oldest woman, her gray hair peeking from beneath her scarf, clutched her hands together. *“We saw you,”* she said, her voice shaking. *“All of you—getting tested. You weren’t afraid.”*

“There’s nothing to fear,” I said quickly, stepping closer. *“I just did it. It’s quick—just a little uncomfortable, that’s all.”*

Her eyes filled with tears. *“My grandson... he has a fever. I—I don’t know what to do.”*

The young doctor, her earlier doubt gone, reached out. *“You’re doing the right thing,”* she said firmly. *“If he has it, we can help him. Early care saves lives.”*

The women nodded, relief flickering in their eyes.

And as they moved toward the testing area—

Something extraordinary happened.

More people appeared.

First, just two—a husband and wife, holding hands tightly. Then a small group of young men, masks pulled high. Then more. And more. And more.

Majid's hands flew to his mouth, his eyes wide with disbelief. *"I can't believe it,"* he choked out. *"They're really coming!"*

Within an hour, the street was alive.

People streamed in from every direction—elders leaning on canes, mothers carrying babies, teenagers standing tall despite their fear. Some faces were nervous. Some were determined. All were brave.

"Why did you come?" I asked a young man as he adjusted his mask after his test.

He glanced toward Mr. Golden, who was speaking softly to an elderly couple. *"I saw my neighbors coming,"* he said simply. *"And I heard Mr. Golden was here."* He shrugged, but his eyes were full of trust. *"If he says it matters... then it matters."*

The crowd swelled. Aadil rushed to organize lines, keeping people safely apart. Sudeep darted through, handing out masks. Arib scribbled names, his hands moving fast.

And still—more came.

People stepped out of homes we thought were empty. They emerged from alleyways, from behind curtains, from places where fear had kept them hidden.

Majid grabbed my arm, tears streaming down his face. *“Faiz,”* he whispered, voice breaking. *“They’re really here. Mr. Golden... he was right. He never gave up.”*

I swallowed hard, my own eyes burning. *“He believed when none of us could.”*

“But why now?” Javed asked as he guided an elderly man forward. *“We’ve begged them for days. What changed?”*

Then it hit me.

“They needed to see it,” I said, watching a mother comfort her child as they waited. *“Not just hear about it—see it. See us doing it first. See that we weren’t afraid.”*

As the sun dipped low, painting the sky in gold and pink, the crowd grew even larger. The doctors worked without rest, their earlier doubts replaced by fierce determination. The air hummed with something new—something powerful.

Hope.

Mr. Farooq rushed to Mr. Golden, breathless. *“Sir—we’re running out of kits! There are still so many waiting—what do we do?”*

Mr. Golden’s face tightened—but only for a second. Then he straightened, his voice unshakable. *“We don’t turn anyone away. Not now. Not after they’ve found the courage to come.”* He turned to the nearest doctor. *“How many left?”*

“Maybe twenty,” she said, worry in her eyes. *“But there are a hundred people at least.”*

Without hesitation, Mr. Golden pulled out his phone. *“Then we get more.”*

He stepped aside, speaking urgently. The rest of us exchanged glances—nervous, but trusting.

"What if... what if we can't?" Sudeep whispered.

"We will," I said, my voice firm. *"Mr. Golden will make it happen. He always does."*

And he did.

Fifteen minutes later, a van screeched to a stop. Workers jumped out, unloading boxes—dozens of fresh testing kits. A cheer erupted from the crowd.

"How?" I asked, stunned.

Mr. Golden smiled, exhaustion and pride mixing in his eyes. *"Some things are worth calling in every favor you have."*

As night fell, the street glowed under the warm light of lamps. The once-empty road was now alive—neighbors talking, children laughing (masks still on), families supporting each other.

Mr. Golden watched it all, his eyes glistening. *"This,"* he whispered, *"is what Irshad dreamed of. People... coming together. Fighting for each other."*

He placed a hand on my shoulder, his grip strong. *"In death, he gave us life. His memory made us fight harder. Love deeper."*

Near midnight, long after we were supposed to end, Mr. Golden gathered us. He looked tired—but his spirit was unbroken.

"Thank you," he said, his voice thick with emotion. *"Every one of you—you were brave when it was easier to quit. You made this happen."*

"But they came for you," Javed said quietly. *"They trust you."*

Mr. Golden shook his head. *"No. They came because they saw us—all of us—standing together. That's what community is. That's what Irshad taught us."*

As we packed up, my heart swelled. This wasn't just a victory over fear.

It was a victory for Irshad's memory.

"People were afraid of the test," I thought, looking at the now-empty street—empty because everyone had been seen, everyone had been helped. "But their faith in Mr. Rehan Golden was stronger."

As if hearing my thoughts, Mr. Golden rested a hand on my shoulder. *"Tonight was just the beginning,"* he said softly. *"Tomorrow, we keep fighting."*

And looking into his eyes—tired, but blazing with determination—I knew.

With him leading us?

We wouldn't just fight.

We would win.

Some memorable photos are screenshots from a WhatsApp video about Mr. Golden's COVID test campaign. The original video was of poor quality, and its resolution dropped even more when shared.



*The policemen had once lost hope /
Mr. Golden watched the crowd grow.*



Covid Test Team of Doctors



People standing and waiting for their tests.



Mr. Majid recording a video/ Mr. Irfan, Rehan's brother.



Hero's Breaking Point: The COVID Test That Nearly Shattered Rehan

The Test Result

A few days later, the test results arrived. Most names showed negative, but a few stood out in bold red—positive. As we read down the list, the room turned deadly quiet. The air itself felt thick, like we were drowning in silence. Papers trembled in shaky hands. Then, we saw it—the name that shattered everything.

Mr. Rehan Golden's face went pale. His fingers, usually so steady, dug into his hair as if trying to tear the truth away. His shoulders caved in, like the sky itself had dropped onto his back.

"No..." His voice was a broken whisper. *"Not him. Please... not him too."*

The words hit like a hammer. This wasn't just another name. It was Irfan Ahmed. Rehan's brother.

The room froze. Someone gasped. Another turned away, unable to watch as Rehan's world cracked open.

He collapsed into his chair, gripping the armrests so hard the wood groaned. "*First Irshad... now this.*" His voice splintered, raw with grief.

Irshad Ahmed—Rehan's elder brother, his guide, the man who had raised him—was already gone. That wound was still fresh, bleeding in his chest. And now, this? The virus wasn't just attacking people. It was tearing his family apart, piece by piece.

"*I need air.*" Rehan's breath came in short, sharp gasps as he shoved back from the table.

The Ambulance

The next morning, we stood outside the Golden Office, hearts pounding. The sky was gray, heavy with unshed rain. The air smelled like fear. Some whispered prayers. Others just stared, hollow-eyed.

Hamza, Irfan's son, wiped his face with a shaking hand.

"*When... when will the ambulance come?*"

"*Soon,*" someone lied. Nobody knew.

Then—a distant siren. Faint at first, then louder, cutting through the silence like a knife. The ambulance rolled up, lights flashing. Nobody moved. We just watched, numb, as Irfan stepped out.

He looked thin. Weak. But his eyes—sharp, unbroken. He leaned on a nurse but walked tall, like a soldier marching to battle. Seeing him like that, so frail but still fighting, made my throat close up.

Before climbing inside, Irfan turned. His hand shook as he reached for Rehan.

Rehan lunged forward, catching his brother's grip like a lifeline.

"Rehan." Irfan's voice was soft but iron-strong. "Listen to me. Whether I live or die—you stay strong." His fingers tightened. "For Irshad. For humanity. Never forget what he taught us." A slow, painful breath. "Serving others... is the greatest worship."

He smiled. A real smile, peaceful, like a man who had made his peace with God.

But then—through the ambulance window—their eyes met.

And both brothers broke.

Tears streamed down Rehan's face as he pressed his palm to the glass. Irfan matched it from inside, his own tears falling silently. No words. Just a lifetime of love and loss screaming between them in that one look.

It was too private. Too painful. Some of us turned away, ashamed to witness it.

The Mask of Strength

Rehan stood rigid, shoulders squared, back straight—the perfect leader. But when he finally turned?

His eyes were bloodshot. His jaw clenched so tight I thought his teeth would crack. His hands flexed, like he wanted to punch the world.

Inside, he was screaming.

First Irshad. Now Irfan.

How much could one man lose before he shattered?

But Rehan didn't break. He couldn't. Too many people needed him. So he locked his pain away, buried it deep, and—

"We keep working." His voice was rough, like gravel. *"That's what they'd want."*

The ambulance doors slammed shut. The engine roared.

Rehan didn't move. Didn't blink. Just stood there, watching as the red lights faded into the distance.

Around him, people cried. Prayed. But he?

Silent.

A statue of grief.

Then—

"Irshad would know what to do." A whisper, so quiet I barely heard it. *"He always knew."*

My chest ached. Irshad had been his compass. Now Rehan was lost in the dark.

But then—

He straightened. Turned. Looked at us with fire in his eyes.

"My brother fights his battle." A deep breath. *"We fight ours."*

No sobs. No screams. Just resolve.

And with that, he walked back inside—carrying the weight of two brothers on his back, and still standing tall.





A random yet memorable photo taken from a video during the pandemic captures Mr. Golden urging people not to abandon their loved ones out of fear of COVID, but instead to help and support them.



22. Irfan's Return, a Father's Sacrifice: Unwavering Love

Many days had passed since Irfan Ahmed returned, but his recovery was slow. His hands trembled as he stepped into the kitchen, his breath shallow and uneven. The doctors had warned him to rest, but his heart refused to listen. The warm, golden scent of spices and freshly baked bread wrapped around him like a hug. His frail body swayed as he reached for a ladle to stir a pot of stew. A volunteer rushed to help, but he waved her off.

“This is my purpose,” he rasped, his eyes bright with a fire that no illness could dim.

Rehan’s Growing Storm

Each morning, Rehan Golden woke before the sun, his mind already racing. The kitchen—once buzzing with chatter and clattering plates—now felt quieter, the shelves emptier. He counted sacks of rice like precious jewels, his heart sinking as they dwindled. *“We need more,”* he muttered, scribbling numbers on a crumpled paper. Lentils, sugar, oil—the list grew, but their money vanished like smoke. At night, he lay awake, the weight of a thousand hungry families pressing on his chest. *What if we fail them?*

One evening, as the sky blushed orange and pink, Rehan slumped at a wooden table, his head in his hands. The list of supplies glared back at him, each item a dagger. He dialed

friends, his voice cracking like dry earth. *"Please—anything helps."* But the lockdown had turned everyone's pockets inside out. *"I'm sorry, Rehan,"* they sighed, their apologies sharp as stones. He stared at the wall, tears burning his eyes. *Is this the end?*

Anwar's Sacrifice

He didn't hear Anwar enter. His brother's shadow fell softly across the table, and when Rehan looked up, Anwar's calm eyes met his. No words were needed—Anwar had always known storms. He pulled a chair close, the legs scraping the floor like a whisper. *"Tell me,"* he said, his voice steady as a river.

Rehan's shoulders crumpled. *"We're broken, Bhai. No money. No food. How do I feed them all?"* His voice broke, raw and small.

Anwar was silent for a long moment, his calloused hands clasped tight. Then, quietly: *"Take Adnan's wedding fund."*

Rehan froze. Memories flashed—Adnan as a boy, grinning in his school uniform; the shiny wedding invitations Anwar had sketched last month. *"No,"* Rehan choked. *"Not his wedding—you've given enough!"*

But Anwar gripped Rehan's shoulder, his touch firm and warm. *"My son's wedding can wait. These families can't."* His eyes glistened, but his smile never wavered. *"This money isn't for a party—it's for life. For hope."*

Rehan's tears fell then, hot and fast. He pulled Anwar into a hug, clinging to him like a child. *"Thank you,"* he whispered, his voice shattered. *"I'll never forget this."*

Anwar patted his back, rough and gentle. *"We're brothers. Your fight is mine."*

The Golden Team's Pillar

Anwar worked like a man possessed. He stirred giant pots until his arms shook, carried sacks of grain up narrow stairs, and stood guard as food was packed—ensuring every family got their share, no more, no less. When rumors spread of hoarders stealing supplies, Anwar marched to their doors, his voice thunder. *“You take one extra bag, and you answer to me!”* His fairness became legend. Mothers kissed his hands; children grinned as he sneaked them sweets.

Rehan watched him sometimes, pride swelling in his chest. And thank God for such brothers. Even on exhausted nights, when Anwar's clothes smelled of smoke and his feet dragged, he'd smile and say, *“We'll sleep when the hungry do.”*

The road was steep, but they'd climb it—together.

As dusk fell, the kitchen glowed like a lantern in the dark. Laughter returned, timid but alive. And when Rehan handed a meal to a trembling old man, the man clutched his hand and whispered, *“You've saved more than my life today.”*

Rehan looked at Anwar, at Irfan, at the team singing as they chopped vegetables. His heart ached, but it was full. They'd lost much, but they'd gained something unbreakable—a family bound not by blood, but by love.





Mr. Anwar Ahmed, dressed in white clothes, sat down on the chair, followed by Hamza, while Mr. Farooq handed out raw food parcels.



23. Golden Team: Food, Friendship, and the Fight Against Fading Light

The sun blazed mercilessly that afternoon, turning the air into a heavy, shimmering curtain. But there we stood—Salman, Saad, Fahim, Mohd Faheem, and me—outside Rehan Golden’s office, our shadows melting into the pavement. Waiting. Always waiting. Salman’s eyes darted to his wristwatch like a nervous tic, his foot tapping a frantic beat against the ground. Saad wiped his brow again and again, sweat glistening like tiny diamonds under the sun. We were supposed to be heroes today, carrying sacks of hope to a slum near Jail Road, where hungry families waited with empty hands and emptier stomachs. But instead, we were prisoners of time, trapped by the one person who could turn even the simplest plan into chaos: Kabeer.

“Your parcels are ready! What’s the holdup?!” Mr. Farooq’s voice roared from inside the office, sharp enough to slice through the heat. We exchanged glances—eyes wide, shoulders slumped—as if we’d all been deflated by the same invisible pin. Fahim clenched his fists, then shouted back, *“Five minutes, sir! Just five!”* his voice cracked, betraying the lie we all knew too well. Five minutes? We’d be lucky if it took five hours.

Half an hour crawled by. Still no Kabeer. The phone rang again, the dial tone buzzing like an angry wasp in our ears. No answer. Mr. Farooq stormed outside, arms crossed, his face a

thundercloud. *"Do you think the food will sprout legs and deliver itself?"* he snapped, his foot tapping a furious rhythm.

Fahim muttered under his breath, *"Wouldn't that be nice..."* his voice barely a whisper, but it carried the weight of our shared frustration. Just as we braced ourselves for another apology, Aadil breezed in, his smile as bright as the sun we cursed. Car keys jingling in his hand, he chirped, *"Off to the station to distribute food! See you later!"*

Mohd Faheem's sarcasm dripped like honey. *"Look at that! Someone who knows what a clock is!"* he clapped slowly, each clap a dagger to our pride.

The clock struck 2 PM. Our phones buzzed nonstop—Sudeep, our friend stranded at home, pleading through the screen. *"Are you coming or not?!"* he barked when I finally answered. *"My mom's roasting me alive! 'These friends of yours,'"* he mimicked, pitching his voice high, *"no discipline, no respect!"* I stifled a laugh, imagining Sudeep's eye-roll. *"Tell her we're on our way!"* I lied, my fingers crossed behind my back.

But Sudeep, ever the martyr, arrived twenty minutes later, drenched in sweat, his face red as a tomato. He'd walked through the furnace of the afternoon, his shirt clinging to his back. One look at our guilty faces and the untouched food sacks, and he threw his hands up. *"Unbelievable!"* he began—but before he could finish, the kitchen duo, Mr. Anas Samad and Nadeem Mateen, marched out like storm clouds.

"Do you even care about these people?!" Mr. Anas barked, his finger jabbing the air. Nadeem's arms were folded so tightly, he looked like he might snap. We huddled together, heads bowed, a flock of sheep caught in a storm. I stared at the cracks in the pavement, counting them like sins. Third time, I thought. Third time Kabeer's vanished during lockdown. And there was

Sudeep, shuffling away into the sunlight, destined for another scolding—until, like a miracle (or a curse), Kabeer appeared.

He stumbled in, hair wild, breathless, wearing a grin that screamed, *“Oops!”* Mr. Anas and Nadeem stormed off, shaking their heads so hard I feared for their necks.

“Kabeer!” we roared in unison, a chorus of fury and relief. *“Where were you?!”*

“I—I lost my car key!” he stammered, patting his pockets like a panicked magician.

I facepalmed so hard my forehead stung. *“I told you yesterday—today matters!”* my voice cracked, raw with frustration. Kabeer’s forgetfulness was a running joke, but today, it tasted bitter.

Sudeep groaned, clutching his heart like a Shakespearean hero. *“Why do I always suffer for your mistakes?!”* he wailed, pointing accusingly. *“At home, I’m scolded. Here, I’m scolded! My only mistake was befriending you clowns!”* His eyes sparkled, betraying the grin he fought to hide.

Laughter erupted—a sudden, joyful explosion. Saad doubled over, wheezing. Fahim slid down the wall, tears streaming. Even Kabeer chuckled, though guilt painted his cheeks pink. But the laughter died as Mr. Farooq reappeared, his face crimson.

“If you can’t handle responsibility, don’t take it!” he thundered. *“Mr. Golden arrives soon. If he sees this circus, you’ll lose his trust forever!”*

“I gave your parcel to Aadil,” Mr. Farooq growled. *“He’s already gone. I’ll make another, but it’ll take an hour.”*

An hour? Mohd Faheem scanned the ground, as if searching for a trapdoor. Desperate, we clasped our hands together. *“Please,*

sir—give us raw sacks! We'll pack them ourselves!" Salman begged, his voice trembling.

Mr. Farooq eyed us, suspicion hardening his gaze. *"You're just covering your tracks."*

"Please!" we chorused. Sudeep dropped to his knees, clutching Mr. Farooq's pant leg. *"Mercy, sir! We're but humble fools!"*

Mr. Farooq sighed, defeated. *"Fine. But if you fail, it's on you."*

We lunged into action, heaving sacks of rice, wheat, and spices into the Scorpio. The weight strained our arms, but our hearts felt lighter. Finally—we were moving.

As we drove off, Salman jabbed Kabeer's ribs. *"What'll you forget next? Your name?"*

Saad snorted. *"Remember his birthday? Forgot the gas cylinder—we ate raw food around a bonfire!"*

The car erupted again, laughter shaking the windows.

Kabeer raised his hands. *"I'm a mess! But at least I'm reliable at it!"* his grin was a sunrise after a storm.

And just like that, the frustration melted. We were a team—flawed, chaotic, but unshakable. Salman hummed off-key to the radio. Saad navigated, squinting at his phone. Fahim scribbled plans. Sudeep rehearsed dramatic speeches. Kabeer drove, determination hardening his grip on the wheel.

Through the chaos, I saw it: friendship, bright and unbreakable. We'd stumble, forget, laugh, and rise—together.

Years from now, we'd tell this story, our voices tangled in laughter, remembering the day heat, hunger, and a lost key couldn't dim the light we carried.

For in that crowded car, shoulders pressed close, hearts aligned, we weren't just delivering food. We were stitching memories into the fabric of our lives—messy, glorious, and utterly ours.



The Ghost House: The Tragedy of ₹12 and the Biscuit-Water Cure

The car tires crunched over broken pavement as we pulled under the shade of a weary neem tree near Jail Road slums. The afternoon sun pressed down like a physical weight, our shirts clinging to sweat-slicked backs. My fingers moved automatically—counting, packing, sealing—while my heart thundered against my ribs. Twenty-five food parcels per team. Four teams. One hundred hungry families waiting.

Sudeep caught my eye as we approached the first home, his dark eyes mirroring my nervousness. Before us stood rows of crumbling dwellings with walls like cracked parchment, their tin roofs baking in the heat. Yet one house stood apart—three stories tall with stubbornly clinging paint, its stubborn dignity refusing to fade.

The knock echoed too loudly.

When the door creaked open, time slowed. Thick glasses magnified eyes that had seen decades of history. The old man's hands trembled as he adjusted his spectacles, but when they landed on our food packet, something miraculous happened—light returned to those tired eyes.

“Beta,” he breathed, the single word carrying the weight of a thousand unspoken gratitudes. “Come inside.”

We hesitated, shifting from foot to foot. “Uncle, we... we might have COVID exposure. It's not safe—”

"No issue, beta." His voice, though weathered, carried the quiet authority of a retired schoolmaster. *"If you can brave the streets for us, we can open our home to you."*

The moment we crossed that threshold, everything changed.

The Classroom of Compassion

The air inside smelled of old books and fading hope. My eyes immediately found the frail woman in the wheelchair—her sari draped over bony shoulders, her smile battling against obvious pain.

"My wife," Uncle said, his voice cracking like dry earth. *"Diabetes. High blood pressure. No medicines since..."* His sentence trailed off into the suffocating silence of lockdown.

The old lady straightened with visible effort. *"I'm feeling much better today,"* she lied beautifully, patting her husband's hand. *"Don't frighten the children."*

When we asked about family, Uncle's face transformed—pride lighting his features as he spoke of his Hyderabad-married daughter and IT-professional son in Imphal. Then, like a candle snuffed out, his expression dimmed. *"My son calls every day, but..."* His trembling fingers brushed a framed photograph. *"Before all this, he was coming next month."*

I saw it then—the cruel mathematics of aging in isolation. Pension checks that couldn't buy care. Phone calls that couldn't replace touch. Medicine shortages that stole tomorrows.

"Uncle," I heard myself say, *"give us your prescriptions. We'll get the medicines."*

What happened next undid me completely.

The old lady's frail hand shot out from her wheelchair. *"Master ji, give them your heart medicine too!"*

“Not important,” Uncle muttered, cheeks flushing.

“Why?” Her voice turned unexpectedly fierce. *“Because my medicines are more important? Who will scold you for skipping prayers if I’m gone?”*

Their bickering—woven with sixty years of love—filled the room with unexpected warmth. As they handed over the prescriptions, their wrinkled fingers brushing against ours, I realized we weren’t just delivering food parcels anymore. We were being entrusted with pieces of their survival.

“You’re doing God’s work,” the aunty whispered, her eyes glistening. *“In these dark times, you children are the lightning bugs showing us the way.”*

The Ripple Effect

At 7 PM, we returned to the car, our bodies heavy with exhaustion but hearts strangely light. Mairaj and Javed were already waiting, their slumped shoulders and red-rimmed eyes telling their own story of hardship witnessed.

“How was it?” I asked as I collapsed onto the cracked car seat, the vinyl sticking to my damp shirt.

Mairaj dragged his hands down his face, the stubble rasping against his palms. *“Heartbreaking,”* he said, the single word carrying volumes of unspoken pain.

As the other teams trickled in over the next thirty minutes, we formed a tight circle in the gathering dusk, voices hushed but urgent. Mairaj and Javed shared first—their story of a mother with three small children (just four, six, and eight years old) clinging to her torn sari like lifelines.

“Her husband’s stranded in Mumbai,” Javed explained, his usually strong hands now clenched into helpless fists. *“Construction laborer. The six-year-old and mother both had*

violent loose motions for days—drinking sugar-salt water because ORS costs twelve rupees they didn't have.”

Mairaj's voice broke as he continued, *“When we handed her the food packet, she... she just collapsed against the doorway sobbing. 'My babies haven't eaten proper food in three days,' she kept saying. 'I've been crushing biscuits into water...'”*

Then came the story of another home—a broken plastic chair cradling a broken man. *“Two abnormal adult daughters,”* Mairaj said, swallowing hard. *“Twenty and twenty-five years old. Former security guard. Laid off last month. When we walked in, he just... looked up at us with these dead eyes and whispered, 'Two days without food. I've failed my family.'”*

Javed leaned forward, his usually cheerful face grim. *“We told him—'No, sir. The system failed you. The world failed you. You? You're still fighting.'”*

The car fell silent except for the occasional snuffle. In just one afternoon, we'd uncovered layers of suffering no statistics could capture—hunger yes, but also medical desperation, systemic abandonment, and the crushing weight of helplessness.

The Awakening

By 8:15 PM, we stood in Mr. Rehan Golden's office, our dusty shoes leaving faint marks on his clean floor. His eager smile faded as he took in our somber faces.

“How did it go?” he asked, rising from behind his desk, the chair scraping loudly in the quiet room.

“All food distributed, sir,” I reported mechanically before the floodgates opened. *“But we found something worse than hunger...”*

As we spilled our stories—the old couple's missing medicines, the mother's desperate biscuit-water solution, the security guard's shame—Mr. Golden's face underwent its own transformation. The businessman's calculating look gave way to something more human, more urgent.

His fist came down on the desk with sudden force. *“Then we expand our mission.”* His eyes burned with a fire that matched our own. *“Starting tomorrow—food AND medicine both.”*

That night, lying in bed, I kept seeing the old couple's intertwined hands, the mother's tear-streaked face, the security guard's slumped shoulders. We'd set out to fill stomachs but returned with our own souls nourished—not by food, but by the terrible, beautiful privilege of serving those the world had forgotten.



A news broadcast photo captured the Golden Team's food distribution efforts, with Mr. Farooq's back visible, highlighting his role in the mission.



The 101st Prescription: Invisible Ink, a Gold Chain to Rot

The next day, the sun rose fiercely, its rays sharp as knives, baking the city under a sky that felt like a heated iron. We sat around a wobbly table, our faces creased with worry, hands clutching a crumpled list of medicines needed for 100 families. Some names on that list were rare, almost mythical, and the weight of finding them pressed down on us like stones. Medicines had become as vital as air—without them, survival felt impossible.

By mid-morning, after passing out steaming cups of tea and toast to hands that reached out with quiet gratitude, we noticed Mr. Golden. It was around 10 to 12, the sun already blazing, when we saw him bent like an old willow tree, deep in urgent conversation with Amir, the graveyard team leader. Their whispers were tense, their faces shadowed with exhaustion. We sat nearby on flimsy plastic chairs, our knees bouncing nervously, exchanging glances that said, *What now?* When Mr. Golden finally turned to us, his eyes were raw and red, as if sleep had abandoned him long ago.

“A trusted medical shop owner told me the medicines we need are at Ghoda Nakas market—sold at fair prices,” he said, his voice rough with exhaustion but absolutely firm. He threw his hands up, frustration carving lines into his weathered face. “But others... they’re preying on desperation, selling hope at ten times its worth!” His fists clenched, as if he could crush the greed of those heartless sellers.

He pressed cash into our hands—fresh notes that felt heavy with responsibility. But then came the blow: all our cars with clearance passes were gone, busy with other life-saving tasks. We stared at each other, silent words hanging in the air. *We’ll walk.*

“And bring vegetables from the mandi (market) on your return,” Mr. Golden added, rubbing his temples as if trying to erase a headache. The mission seemed to grow taller, like a mountain we had to climb with bare hands.

We huddled together and quickly divided into two teams. Aadil, with his confident stance and quick thinking, would take ten others to buy vegetables, while Sudeep and I, adjusting our masks nervously, headed to the dawa market (medicine market). The market was about 1–2 kilometers away from the mandi—a distance that felt endless under the sun’s cruel glare.

When we reached the mandi, the air was thick with heat and silence. The once-bustling marketplace was a ghost of itself, vendors arranging vegetables with tired hands under the blinding noon sun. Aadil’s team waved at us, their smiles thin but determined, before disappearing into the maze of stalls. Sudeep and I hurried on, sweat soaking our shirts, our footsteps echoing with purpose.

The dawa market was chaos. Crowds shoved past each other, voices rising in desperation. Empty shelves gaped like hungry mouths. A shopkeeper took our list, his hands shaking as he scanned it, when a man stumbled in—his clothes wrinkled, hair wild, eyes red-rimmed. He clutched a prescription so tightly his knuckles turned bone-white.

“Please,” the man begged, his voice cracking. *“This medicine—my son... he’s getting worse.”* His words hung in the air, sharp as a knife.

The shopkeeper’s shoulders slumped. *“It’s not available... I don’t know when it’ll come.”*

The man’s face collapsed. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he clasped his hands, trembling. *“Please... I’ll do anything. He’s my only child!”* His voice broke, a sound so raw it made my chest ache.

The shopkeeper patted his shoulder gently, promising to try. As the man turned to leave, shoulders sagging like broken wings, I touched his arm. *"What's wrong with your son?"*

He looked at us, hope flickering in his eyes like a tiny flame. *"Dravet Syndrome—a rare epilepsy. No medicine for a week. He's... he's seizing every day."* His voice shook as he spoke his name—Mohan, a schoolteacher, a father who'd waited 15 years for his miracle child.

Sudeep snapped a photo of the prescription. *"We'll find it,"* I said, though doubt gnawed at me. Mohan gripped our hands, his touch desperate. *"Thank you... thank you,"* he whispered, pressing his palms to his heart as if sealing a promise.

Back at the mandi, Aadil's team was battling their own storm. A vendor had hidden rotten vegetables beneath fresh ones. *"Check properly!"* Aadil barked, his voice sharp with anger. Nearby, Dr. Aamir—a pathologist with eyes that laughed even behind his mask—held up a bottle gourd. *"Who knew my degree would help me play vegetable inspector?"* He wiggled his eyebrows, and despite the tension, we burst into laughter, the sound warm and fleeting.

But then Zeeshan froze, staring at a woman nearby. Her saree was faded, her face etched with fear as two children clung to her legs. She held out a gold chain to a vendor. *"Please... 20,000 rupees. My children need food."*

The vendor scratched the chain, sneering. *"I'll give 500."*

"It's worth 28,000!" she cried, her voice fraying. *"If jewelry shops were open, would I beg here?"*

Our resident joker, Sudeep, wobbled, his usual perfectly styled hair now plastered to his forehead, and chimed in with a theatrical groan, “*But my hairstyling skills? I always knew they would help me carry 50 kilograms of vegetables!*” He stumbled dramatically, nearly dropping his crate, and we howled, the sound lifting our spirits. Despite my aching arms, I laughed, teasing, “*It’s not 50 kilograms—it’s two people carrying 50, so only 25 for you!*” I poked him playfully in the side, nearly losing my balance in the process.

As we kept joking, keeping each other’s spirits up with banter that flowed as freely as our sweat, Zeeshan suddenly stopped, his face flushed. “*I’m so thirsty,*” he said, his voice raspy, “*my throat feels like sandpaper.*” We all nodded in agreement, suddenly acutely aware of our own parched throats. We searched desperately for a hand pump or tap, our eyes scanning the streets, but couldn’t find anything. The water bottles we had brought were long empty, the last drops savored hours ago.

The Sweet Reward

By the time we reached Mr. Golden’s office—8 kilometers later for others and 10 kilometers for me and Sudeep, legs trembling, throats parched—we were ghosts of ourselves. But there, like angels, stood Mr. Anas and Farooq with glasses of *sharbat* (sweet drink), condensation sparkling like diamonds.

“*Areyyy, sharbat bana hai!*” Javed screamed, clapping like a child. We raced, crates forgotten, laughter mixing with gasps. Zeeshan and Aamir reached them first, but no one cared. The *sharbat* was cold, sweet, alive on our tongues. We drank like we’d never taste water again, drops spilling down our chins, our laughter ringing in the air.

That *sharbat*, cool and sweet against our parched lips, tasted like the sweetest thing in the world. We gulped it down greedily, some of it dribbling down our chins, but we were

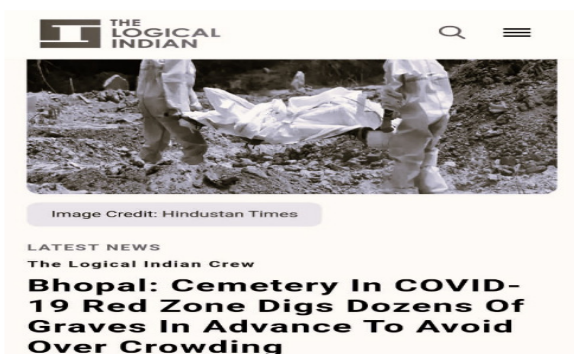
beyond caring about appearances. Maybe it was the thirst, maybe the hard work, but even today, when we gather and reminisce, we all agree with dreamy smiles on our faces—there’s never been *sharbat* quite like that.

The Lasting Memory

Years later, when we talk about that day, we still smile. Not just because of the *sharbat*, but because in the heat and dust, we found fragments of hope—for the woman in Janta Colony, for ourselves. We carried more than medicines and vegetables that day. We carried the weight of kindness, the glue of friendship, and the unshakeable truth that even in darkness, light finds a way. And when the world felt broken, we learned to mend it—one step, one laugh, one shared glass at a time.



A pandemic broadcast highlighted the Rehan Golden Fans Club’s raw food distribution, a flame of hope in dark times.



The Logical India published an article on the rising number of deceased in Bhopal, highlighting that graves were being dug in advance.



24. Four Thousand Rotis: A Death Sentence for Their Makers

The morning air was cool, but sweat poured down Mr. Farooq's face as he dragged a heavy sack of onions across the kitchen floor. His shoulders sagged under the weight—not just of the onions, but of exhaustion, of responsibility, of days without rest. Around him, the kitchen hummed with tired activity.

His brother, Mr. Mujahid, stood nearby, rolling rotis (flatbreads) with slow, deliberate movements. His hands trembled slightly, his fingers stiff from hours of work. His nephews and their friend Abid worked beside him, their eyes bloodshot, their movements sluggish. Dark circles hung beneath their eyes like bruises.

“Four thousand rotis for lunch... another four thousand for dinner...” Mujahid muttered under his breath, wincing as he straightened his aching back. These men were the backbone of the operation—yet their own bodies were breaking.

In another corner, Rehan Golden's brothers, Anwar and Irfan, packed food parcels with mechanical precision. Their fingers moved quickly, but their faces were blank with exhaustion. They worked like machines—but even machines needed rest.

Then Rehan walked in.

His sharp eyes scanned the room, taking in the fatigue, the strain, the silent suffering. His gaze locked onto Mujahid, and his brow furrowed.

"Mujahid," Rehan called, his voice cutting through the kitchen's noise. *"Are you alright?"*

Mujahid forced a weak smile. *"Yes, yes... I'm fine."* But his voice cracked, betraying him.

Rehan stepped closer, arms crossed. *"You don't look fine."* His eyes narrowed at Mujahid's pale face, his shaking hands.

Just then, Mujahid's nephew Tayyab rushed over, pressing medicine into his uncle's palm. Mujahid swallowed it dry, without water—too tired to even fetch a glass.

Rehan's jaw tightened. *"What's that medicine for?"*

Tayyab looked down, his shoulders slumping. *"His sugar levels... they've been out of control for days."*

Silence fell over the kitchen.

Every worker froze, their eyes darting between Tayyab and Mujahid. The truth hung in the air like a storm cloud: these men were destroying themselves.

They slept 2–3 hours a night—sometimes not at all. They worked through pain, through sickness, through exhaustion. And for men like Mujahid, already battling health problems, this relentless sacrifice was pushing them toward collapse.

Taha, Mujahid's other nephew, rushed in with a diabetes testing kit. When he checked Mujahid's sugar levels, his hands shook.

"How much?" Rehan demanded, his voice tight.

Taha swallowed hard. *"Four hundred and ten."*

The number hit like a hammer.

Rehan's face went pale. His fists clenched at his sides. For a moment, his usual composure cracked—his eyes glistened with unshed tears. He turned away, blinking rapidly, struggling to keep his emotions in check.

Mujahid just shrugged, as if to say, "What does it matter? The work must go on."

The Harsh Lesson – When Good Intentions Aren't Enough

Meanwhile, another team—Arib, Anas, Adnan, Aadil, Hamza, Aamir, and Nadeem—prepared to distribute raw food packets in Aishbagh. Their movements were slow but determined, their faces set with stubborn resolve.

My own group—Sudeep, Salman, Kabeer, Javed, Fahim, Faisal, Shibli, Saboor, and I—approached Rehan with bright eyes and eager voices.

"*Rehan sir!*" I said, enthusiasm ringing in my tone. "*Can we deliver medicines to the slums near Jail Road?*"

Rehan turned slowly. His bloodshot eyes met mine, and the exhaustion in them made my smile falter.

He rubbed his temples, then spoke in a voice heavy with weariness.

"*Listen to me,*" he said softly. "*This isn't a school trip. This isn't an adventure.*" His voice cracked slightly. "*We're fighting an invisible enemy. And we cannot afford to waste a single resource—not food, not medicine, not people.*"

He gestured at our group—nine of us—and his voice turned firm.

"*Does it really take nine people to carry one bag of medicine?*"

The words hit like a slap.

Shame burned through me, hot and sharp. My ears turned red. My throat tightened. Around me, my friends shifted uncomfortably, their eyes dropping to the floor.

Sudeep caught my gaze, his face mirroring my humiliation. *What were we thinking?* his expression seemed to say.

The entire kitchen had gone quiet. Every pair of eyes was on us, watching as Rehan exposed our thoughtlessness. I hunched my shoulders, wishing I could disappear.

“We’re sorry, Rehan sir,” we mumbled, our voices overlapping in a chorus of regret.

Rehan sighed, running a hand through his messy hair. *“It’s okay,”* he said, softer now. *“Just learn from this. Every effort matters. Every person matters.”*

His eyes held ours, not with anger, but with something deeper—disappointment, and a quiet plea for us to do better.

In that moment, the weight of our mission truly sank in.

This wasn’t just about helping others.

It was about not failing them.

It was about not wasting the sacrifices of men like Mujahid, who worked themselves to the brink of collapse.

My chest tightened with a mix of shame and determination. I stood straighter, my fists clenched at my sides.

We would do better.

We had to.

Because heroes weren’t just those who helped—they were those who endured.

And right now, endurance was the hardest battle of all.





During one random moment of the pandemic, Aadil, Hamza, and others set out to distribute raw food to those in need.



Blunder, Shame, Belonging: How a Slum's 'Delivery Boys' Became Its Fragile Hope

The moment we stepped outside with that medicine bag, Sudeep and I exploded into laughter—the kind that comes when shame and relief collide. My stomach ached from giggling so hard.

"Man," I gasped between laughs. I punched Sudeep's arm lightly. "*We really screwed up back there, didn't we?*"

Sudeep wiped tears from his eyes, holding up the medicine bag like it was some sacred treasure. "*VIP mission!*" he announced dramatically, making his voice deep like a movie trailer. "*Two heroes... one medicine bag... delivering hope to the people!*" We both cracked up again, the tension from Rehan's scolding melting away with each step.

Our first stop was Master Ji's house. The metal gate clanged loudly under my knuckles. When his tired face appeared, his eyes immediately locked onto the medicine box in my hands.

"Beta... (Son)..." His voice shook like leaves in wind. *"You found it?"*

"Yes, Uncle!" we chorused, grins splitting our faces.

Master Ji's whole body seemed to sigh with relief. The deep wrinkles around his eyes softened as he smiled. *"Come, have tea,"* he insisted, already waving us inside.

"We can't stay, Master Ji," I said, patting our bulging bag. *"So many more houses to visit."*

Just then, a determined squeaking sound came from inside. Master Ji's wife was pushing her wheelchair toward us, her thin arms trembling with effort. Each rotation of the wheels seemed to take all her strength, but her face showed only fierce determination.

"Slowly, slowly," Master Ji murmured, hovering protectively. The love in his eyes made me look away, feeling like I was seeing something too private.

When she finally reached us, her smile lit up the whole doorway. *"May the Almighty always bless you,"* she said in a voice much stronger than her fragile body. Her papery hands grasped ours. *"Thank you, my sons. Thank you."*

Something warm and heavy settled in my chest. I glanced at Sudeep and saw his eyes were suspiciously bright too.

At the next house, a young mother answered with two pale children clinging to her legs. When I handed her the ORS (Oral Rehydration Salts) packets, her hands flew to her mouth. *"The medicine... you really brought it?"* Tears spilled down her cheeks as she took the packets with trembling fingers. *"God bless you, bhaiya (brother)."*

The little boy hiding behind her skirt peeked out with one curious eye. I winked at him, and he immediately buried his face again, but not before I saw a tiny smile.

House after house, story after story. An old woman with hands like crumpled paper blessed us with tears in her eyes. A grandfather showed us photos of his grandson while waiting for his blood pressure medicine. Each doorstep was a new world, each person a universe of struggles and hopes.

The sun beat down mercilessly. Our shirts stuck to our backs with sweat. My feet ached terribly, but somehow, the pain didn't matter.

"This isn't like delivering food," Sudeep panted, squinting at a medicine label. *"One mistake could really hurt someone."*

I nodded, double-checking the next address. The weight of responsibility should have felt heavy, but instead, it made me stand taller.

As the sun began to set, painting the sky in fiery colors, Sudeep kicked a pebble thoughtfully. *"You saw how they looked at us, right?"* His voice was quiet, different. *"Like we were... important."*

I laughed, but it caught in my throat. *"We're just delivery guys."*

Sudeep stopped walking. The golden light made his face glow. *"Are we? To that little boy, you were the medicine hero. To Master Ji's wife, we were answers to her prayers."*

Back at base, the room buzzed with stories. Arib was dramatically reenacting how an old man forced sweets into his pockets despite his protests. Laughter bounced off the walls.

Then Rehan sir entered, and the room settled like snow. He looked exhausted, but his eyes... his eyes were alive.

“Today,” he said in that voice that always found your heart, “you didn’t just deliver medicine. You delivered hope.”

In that moment, I understood. The medicine had healed us too—not our bodies, but something deeper. We weren’t just volunteers anymore.

We were keepers of hope, carriers of light. And that changed everything.



A memorable News 24 photo captures an interview on the Golden Team's pandemic efforts, with team members in the background.



Will This Nightmare Ever End? Minutes Stole a Life

I dragged my aching body into the Golden office that morning, late again. The sweet scent of chai and toast hung in the air, a ghost of the morning rush—I’d already missed the crew out on their rounds. In the kitchen, the sizzle of spices was the only sign of Mr. Farooq’s team preparing for lunch.

I collapsed into a chair by the entrance, gazing out the window at the empty streets. It was a ghost town of shut doors and closed windows, as if the buildings themselves were holding their breath. A shiver ran down my spine as I wondered: *When will this nightmare end?*

“Late again, my friend?”

I jumped at Sudeep’s voice. His eyes crinkled at the corners, a teasing grin on his face as he stood over me like a teacher catching a tardy student.

Rolling my eyes, I laughed, a real laugh that felt good after so much stress. *“Yeah, yeah, look who’s talking! You’re not exactly a model of punctuality either!”*

Sudeep sank into the chair beside me, his groan muffled as he scrubbed his face with his hands. *“Yaar,”* he mumbled through his fingers, *“I don’t know how much longer we can do this. Yesterday nearly broke me. My back is killing me, my arms feel like jelly.”* He looked up, his eyes hollowed out with fatigue. *“One more sack of flour, and I swear I’ll just melt into the pavement.”*

I chuckled, but my heart wasn’t in it. A heavy silence settled between us. *“Did you ever think,”* I whispered, leaning closer, *“in your wildest nightmares, that we’d be living like this?”* I gestured toward the window. *“I mean, this can’t be real.”*

Sudeep’s shoulders slumped as he leaned back. *“No, man,”* he said softly. *“Sometimes I think I’ll wake up from this, drenched in sweat, just grateful it wasn’t real.”* His gaze went distant. *“But it’s real every single morning. You put on the mask and just pray it’s enough.”*

“And the kids?” My voice came out hoarse. *“What kind of life is this for them? Locked inside all day? Will they ever know what it’s like to just run around without a care?”*

Sudeep's face crumpled. *"I try not to think about it,"* he whispered, his voice breaking. *"It's too painful."* He rubbed his temples slowly, shoulders hunched with a bone-deep exhaustion.

The put-put-put of a scooter cut through our silence. I turned to see Aadil arriving with a bulging sack of daal strapped to the front—exactly like his father, Mr. Irshad Ahmed, used to do. Same beat-up scooter, same quiet determination. History repeating itself.

Sudeep nudged me, a sad smile touching his lips. *"Look at him,"* he whispered, his eyes suddenly bright with unshed tears. *"Putting his grief aside to help others. If sainthood is real, he's at the front of the line."*

I smiled too, a warmth spreading through my chest. *"Yeah, he's his father's son, through and through. I wonder if he even remembers what rest feels like."*

As Aadil approached, Sudeep leaned closer. *"Remember how Uncle Irshad used to say, 'In Allah's eyes, the highest duty is to serve humanity'?"* he said, his voice quivering.

I nodded, a bittersweet ache tightening my chest. *"Aadil is living that truth every day,"* I murmured. *"Abba would be so proud."*

"Alright, what are you two gossiping about?" Aadil called out, wiping sweat from his brow. Despite the dark circles under his eyes, his smile was radiant.

"Just saying we were this close to stealing your tea," I joked, holding my thumb and index finger barely apart, *"but decided to be good boys and wait."*

Aadil threw his head back and laughed, a real, freeing laugh that made his eyes disappear into happy crescents. *"I knew it! Can't trust you lot for a second!"*

We huddled together sipping chai as the toast team returned, dust coating their shoes, masks hanging around their necks. Jokes and laughter bounced between us, like fresh air in a stuffy room. For those precious minutes, the weight lifted. The warm tea slid down my throat and I closed my eyes, savoring a simple joy I'd almost forgotten.

Dr. Verma burst through the door like an alarm shattering a dream, his white coat flapping behind him, his face split into a wide grin. *"Where's my tea, you freeloaders?"* he boomed. *"Don't tell me you drank it all without me!"*

"Never!" Daud leapt up, nearly spilling his own tea as he rushed to grab a fresh cup. *"Your cup is safe with us, Doctor Sahib!"*

Dr. Verma had just returned from checking on patients and was preparing to see three more serious cases. His stethoscope hung around his neck, dust covering his shoes. As a volunteer doctor making house calls at all hours, he was nothing short of a miracle worker.

Arib Samad poked his head through the doorway. *"Sir, are you ready to go?"* he asked, jangling keys.

Dr. Verma gulped down his tea and stood. *"Yes! Lead the way, my young friend!"* Refreshed, he was ready for another round.

They were heading out to check on two elderly men—one with chest pain, another with an infected bedsore—and a paralyzed woman with severe neck pain. Hospitals were still turning people away without COVID tests, and nobody wanted to enter the white buildings that now seemed like death traps. Private hospitals had hiked their fees, leaving families trapped between fear and poverty. Mr. Rehan Golden often discussed these heartbreaking situations with Dr. Verma, eyes filled with a sad determination. He called them "pandemic heroes"—warriors armed with stethoscopes instead of swords.

Dr. Verma returned just as Mr. Golden walked in, his normally proud posture slightly stooped. They huddled in a corner, speaking in low tones. I couldn't hear everything, but Dr. Verma's face grew serious as he described the man with the bedsore.

"He needs to be admitted to a hospital," Dr. Verma said firmly. *"The infection is spreading."*

Mr. Golden sighed deeply, fingers scratching his salt-and-pepper beard. *"Let's try the government hospital again,"* he said, his voice lacking conviction. *"I know the family's terrified, but we have to try. Private hospitals are out of the question with their robbery prices. We'll figure something out."* His tired eyes suddenly sparked with resolve. *"We always do."*

Watching them plan their next battle, I felt the full weight of our work crash down on me. The road ahead stretched endlessly into darkness. But looking around at our team—sipping tea, sharing stories, quietly planning—I felt a bloom of unexpected pride in my chest. Pride in what we'd become.

It wasn't just about surviving anymore. It was about finding those small, glittering moments of joy in the darkness—a warm cup, a friend's laugh, the quiet satisfaction of helping. For now, that had to be enough.

Dr. Verma motioned me over, patting his coat pocket. *"Got that medicine we requested,"* he said, pulling out a small package.

My heart leapt. We had asked for this medicine for Mohan, the frail man whose eyes had been so desperate as he described his son's epilepsy. When Sudeep arrived, I showed him the small box. Our faces broke into matching grins; we'd been trying to get this for days.

But when I called Mohan's number, my smile froze. The voice on the other end was hollow, empty of everything but grief. My hand fell limply to my side as I disconnected the call.

Sudeep's face scrunched with concern. *"What's wrong? What happened?"*

I couldn't speak. My mind felt like static. The small package in my hand suddenly weighed a thousand pounds.

Later, when I finally found my voice, I told him. *"His son died three days ago,"* I whispered, the words like ash on my tongue.

Sudeep's face crumpled. He squeezed his eyes shut and turned away, his shoulders shaking. We sat in the suffocating silence, the useless medicine a heavy weight between us. The unspoken thought was a deafening scream in my mind: *We were too late.*



A striking news broadcast photo from the second wave shows Rehan Golden telling a reporter, "Every day, we receive 7 to 10 bodies," highlighting the pandemic's tragic toll.



25. Narrow Lane, No Ambulance: The Birth of the Golden Ride

Aadil's eyes glistened as he listened to Mr. Rehan Golden and Dr. Verma. Behind his smile was a wound that refused to heal—the memory of that terrible day his father was turned away from a private hospital. They hadn't wanted a patient; they'd wanted a COVID test report. It had never been about saving a life. It had only been about money.

"Abba," Aadil whispered, the vow a ghost on his lips. "I promise. I'll make things better. I'll help others the way no one helped you."

During those dark days, government hospitals overflowed while private ones demanded fortunes. They wouldn't admit the sick without a COVID test, and even then, required huge payments upfront.

Aadil's mind replayed the agonizing hours. *What were we supposed to do?* he thought, his fists clenching. *Just watch him get worse while we waited for a piece of paper?*

His grief was a private storm, but it was interrupted by Mr. Golden's serious expression. "Aadil," he began, "we have a problem. Dr. Verma has secured a free bed at Charak Hospital for the old man with the bedsores, but there's a complication."

Dr. Verma stepped closer. "He lives in a very narrow lane in the Old City," he explained. "An ambulance can't get through. We have no way to transport him."

Hearing this, a new energy surged through Aadil. Here was a problem he understood in his very bones—a problem he could solve.

“Uncle Rehan,” Aadil said, his voice ringing with a new and sudden purpose. *“The lane is too narrow for an ambulance. But I can take him on my scooter.”*

Mr. Rehan looked worried. *“But Aadil, he’s very weak. Can he even sit on an Activa?”*

Aadil nodded, his jaw set. *“With help, we can do it. We have to try.”*

Mr. Golden’s eyes widened in surprise, a flicker of hope chasing the worry from his face. *“Are you absolutely sure about this, Aadil?”*

“Yes, Uncle Rehan,” Aadil replied, his voice unwavering. *“I’ve never been more sure of anything.”*

Soon, Aadil arrived at the old man’s house with Aamir, Daud, and Arib. It was a delicate, slow-motion ballet of care. Aadil held the scooter steady as Aamir and Daud gently eased the frail old man onto the seat. Dr. Aamir then mounted behind him, becoming a human backrest, his arms a protective cage.

As they set off, Aadil’s heart pounded with a mix of fear and resolve. He rode slowly, hyper-aware of the precious life in his hands. Daud and Arib ran alongside, their faces grim with concentration, ready to steady the vehicle at a moment’s notice.

The old man clung tightly to Aadil, his eyes squeezed shut. Aadil spoke softly to him, his voice a calm anchor in the man’s fear. *“Don’t worry, uncle. We’ll get you there safely. Just hold on.”*

After what felt like an eternity, they reached Charak Hospital. Aadil gently helped the old man into a waiting wheelchair. Dr.

Verma met them at the entrance, his expression one of deep relief.

As the doctor wheeled the patient away, Mr. Golden let out a long, shaky breath. *"Thank goodness,"* he said. *"They made it."*

Aadil's face was flushed, his mind racing. The successful trip, the memory of his father, the city's impossible lanes—it all clicked into place. An idea, bright and brilliant, bloomed in the chaos.

"Uncle Rehan!" he exclaimed. *"What if we did this for everyone? Use my scooter to help people who can't afford an ambulance, or to reach places where they can't go? We could call it the 'Golden Ride'!"*

Mr. Golden's eyes lit up. A slow, genuine smile spread across his face, the first real one in days.

"Aadil," he said softly, his voice thick with emotion, *"that's... that's brilliant. Let's do it."*

From that day forward, the Golden Ride became a new lifeline. Aadil was its primary driver, but if he was busy, I or another team member would take the keys.

For Aadil, this was more than a service. It was a promise kept. Each person they helped was a small act of rebellion against the system that had failed his family. Each ride was a stone laid on the foundation of his father's legacy. With every life they touched, the fire in his heart didn't just burn; it forged something new.

He knew Abba would be proud.

Looking at his team, at Mr. Golden, and at the hospital where they had just delivered hope, a quiet warmth spread through his chest. *This is just the beginning,* he thought, a vow echoing in

the silence. *We're going to make a difference. One ride at a time.*



सांध्य

दैनिक पृथ्वी लहर

सोनिया गांधी और राहुल गांधी मेरे प्रेरणा स्रोत: आदिल गोल्डन

दैनिक पृथ्वीलहर | भोपाल

कोरोना महामारी में अपनी जान की परवाह ना करते हुए आदिल गोल्डन पहले दिन से ही जुड़ गए थे गरीबों की सेवा में आदिल गोल्डन का कहना है कि जब कि मेरे फादर की इस कोरोना महामारी की बीमारी के बीच में डेथ भी हो गई तो भी मैंने गरीबों को खाना बांटने में कोई कसर नहीं छोड़ी हर जगह जगह से जहां जहां से फोन आता था । आदिल गोल्डन का कहना है कि गरीबों की सेवा करना मेरा कर्तव्य सोनिया गांधी जी के मार्गदर्शन में जो उन्हें कहा था कि गरीबों को

रास्ते में जो पैदल आ रहे हैं उनको पानी चाय का इंतजाम किया जाए सोनिया गांधी और राहुल गांधी जी मेरे प्रेरणा स्रोत हैं मैं उनके आशीर्वाद से आज प्रदेश कांग्रेस आईटी सेल का महामंत्री हूं और मैं राज्य करता था लोगों के घर-घर खाना और राशन और भूखे नहीं रह ना देना यह मेरा कर्तव्य था मैं आए इन लोगों के पीछे रोज लगा रहा हूं और आज भी उनके साथ उनकी सेवा में लगा हुआ । इस मौके पर मैं बोला कि मेरे चाचा रिहान गोल्डन ने कंधे से कंधा मिलाकर हम लोगों के साथ काम किया और हम लोग



आज तक गरीबों को राशन और खाना बढ़ते जा रहे हैं और अभी भी आगे भी जब हमें कोई मौका मिलेगा हम उनके लिए तैयार रहेंगे करो ना कि जो बीमारी है ।

A powerful newspaper clipping from the second wave features Aadil stating, “Even after my father passed away, we never stopped providing free food since the first lockdown.” His unwavering dedication earned widespread praise, highlighting resilience and compassion in crisis.



26. India's COVID Crisis: Private Hospitals – Profits Over Patients?

The Situation

During the COVID-19 pandemic, India's healthcare system faced major challenges. Private hospitals, important for their advanced care, became key in fighting the virus. However, many reportedly put profits first. They created very expensive COVID-19 treatment packages, making care unaffordable for many.

The Packages

As the pandemic worsened, private hospitals offered fixed-duration packages for COVID-19 patients, typically lasting 3, 5, 7, or even more days. These covered room charges, doctor visits, nursing care, medicines, and tests. Costs were exorbitantly high—ranging from thousands to lakhs of rupees—making them prohibitively expensive for most Indians.

- **3-Day Package:** The cost for a 3-day COVID-19 treatment package ranged from ₹50,000 to ₹3,00,000. This included basic care and medications but did not cover more intensive treatments or complications.
- **5-Day Package:** The 5-day package cost between ₹3,00,000, to ₹7,00,000, offering slightly more

comprehensive care but still falling short of covering critical care needs.

Exorbitant Costs and Access Issues

The very high package prices prevented many people from getting timely or proper medical care.

Impact on Non-COVID-19 Patients

Non-COVID-19 patients faced even greater challenges, as hospitals often refused treatment unless they purchased expensive packages. This resulted in three critical consequences:

- **Delayed Treatment:** Patients with chronic or other illnesses faced extended waits for essential care.
- **Increased Mortality:** Many died due to unaffordable or inaccessible treatment.
- **Financial Strain:** Families were forced to exhaust savings, sell assets, or take loans to afford care.



A memorable photo of Mr. Rehan Golden during a news interview, captured from the broadcast of RH News 24 channel, taken in the graveyard.



27. 2000 Parcels, 2 Teams, 1 Impossible Choice: Hunger Doesn't Wait for Safety

We were around—just forty to fifty of us in total. The full-time shift of five to seven people never left the Golden Office, their eyes rimmed with dark circles from their 24/7 vigil. After each seven-day shift, despite exhaustion slumping their shoulders, they'd return to regular duties while another group took over, their faces showing both weariness and resolve. Our mission never paused. Even off-shift, twelve to fourteen of us would often sit together late at night, faces lit by dim lamps.

We stayed not just for the work but because we found comfort in each other—not merely colleagues but family bound by something stronger than blood. During uncertain times, we shared stories, mostly horror tales that made our skin crawl yet somehow provoked laughter. Mr. Farooq, our storyteller with mischief-twinkling eyes, spun eerie yarns with dramatic hand gestures that sent shivers down our spines. Even during the lockdown's dead silence, with fear hanging like fog, his tales offered escape and joy amid our heavy responsibilities.

The atmosphere remained light—soft chuckles, warm smiles, jokes that made shoulders shake with laughter. For a moment, the world's weight lifted. Then, suddenly, the room fell silent as Mr. Rehan Golden entered with soft yet commanding footsteps. His calm authority and straight posture drew all eyes,

yet his warm smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes made everyone feel at ease. He sat effortlessly, like any team member, though backs straightened respectfully. We knew he was our heart.

With my own heart pounding nervously, I spoke up. *"Uncle Rehan,"* I began, voice steady despite my concern, hands clasped to hide their trembling, *"I got a call from Shahwar Siddiqui, my old college friend. He lives in Old Vidhan Sabha Colony (a densely populated area in Bhopal). The situation there is bad, really bad. The entire place is locked down, and the residents are struggling, many going to bed with empty stomachs. Most of them are poor. They live day to day, earning just enough to eat. But now, with the lockdown, they have nothing, not even hope."*

Rehan's face darkened, lines forming between his eyebrows as his fingers drummed the table. *"We can't ignore this,"* he said decisively, eyes flashing with determination. *"Day after tomorrow, we'll send at least two thousand raw food parcels."*

Javed looked up quickly. *"But day after tomorrow, we're already scheduled to distribute food in New City—Subhash Nagar, Ashoka Garden, and the surrounding areas,"* he reminded him, palms open helplessly.

Mr. Farooq stroked his beard thoughtfully. *"Both areas need help, and it's going to be difficult to manage both at once. Our resources are stretched thin already."*

Rehan paused, his gaze distant. *"I've heard about Old Vidhan Sabha from other sources too,"* he said slowly. *"We'll split the team. That's the only way. One group will cover New City, and another will head to Old Vidhan Sabha under Aadil Irshad's supervision."*

The plan was set with nods around the circle. Two teams would deploy in two days. We faced the challenge of delivering food safely during a pandemic—a risk to us and those we helped.

Aadil, despite the dark circles under his eyes, had already contacted Shahwar and local leaders, who promised to ensure that residents maintained distance and avoided crowds. Yet we knew hunger doesn't wait for rules; the desperation was visible on people's faces.

At 6 PM on the distribution day, we arrived at Old Vidhan Sabha with racing hearts and sweaty hands. Two cars carried our supplies—one with cooked food, aromas wafting through sealed containers; the other with neatly stacked raw supplies. Word spread instantly as we parked. People gathered despite safety warnings, hope and fear in their eyes, mothers clutching children close.

The cooked food disappeared within two hours, handed to eager, trembling hands. For the raw food distribution, we formed smaller teams with local guides and knocked on every door in the narrow alleys. Sweat ran down our backs despite the evening breeze, but by the hour's end, every home had received its share.

An elderly woman with a bent back held her parcel with shaking hands. *"I don't have enough words to thank you,"* she whispered, voice quivering like autumn leaves, eyes brimming with tears. *"You've fed us when we had nothing. May God bless you all."* Her blessing felt like a warm blanket on a cold night.

A father of three approached next, shoulders squared with renewed strength. *"You've given us hope,"* he said quietly, arm around his youngest, who peeked shyly from behind his leg. *"For days, we didn't know how we'd feed our children. Today, you've brought us relief."* His weathered face broke into a smile like sunshine through storm clouds.

Then came a disabled man living with his elderly mother. He owned a small shop selling chocolates and ice cream, now shut with dust gathering on its once-colorful display. As he accepted the food, tears streamed down his lined face onto trembling hands. Too overwhelmed for words, he simply nodded repeatedly, clutching the package to his chest.

Exhaustion set in as we finished—limbs heavy as stone, backs aching from bending and lifting. But driving back, the weariness didn't matter compared to the happiness we'd brought, the spark rekindled in formerly dull eyes. Their gratitude warmed our hearts and fueled our purpose. Each smile represented a victory against despair.

Every chapter of our journey reminded us why we persevered. The challenges loomed like impossible mountains, **but the rewards were greater still—like reaching peaks that revealed endless possibilities.**



A memorable photo captures Aadil distributing food at the Old Vidhan Sabha, wearing a blue-black shirt



28. Lockdown Blackout: Restoring Bhopal's Internet Overnight

The summer afternoon air was a sticky, quiet film over the city. Heavy with humidity, it clung to us as Faheem, Sudeep, Javed, and I slipped into the long-forgotten State Bank of India building in Jahangirabad, a minute's walk from the Golden Office. Once a bustling branch, it had stood empty for nearly two decades. Whispers of ghost stories had followed it through the lockdown, but for us, the place was magic. This was our secret hideout—a dusty sanctuary where grown men could feel like defiant boys again. Sneaking cigarettes in the open was risky; if any elder caught us, it meant shame and endless scolding, a serious matter in our culture. But here, between shared smoke and quiet laughter, we were free.

“Man, we’re like teenagers sneaking around,” I chuckled, leaning against the dusty wall as I took a drag. *“Married men hiding to smoke—what would our wives say?”*

Sudeep grinned, flicking ash onto the floor. *“Mine would probably join us.”*

We all burst out laughing until Faheem's phone suddenly buzzed, shattering the moment. His relaxed smile vanished as he pressed the phone to his ear.

“This can’t be happening,” he groaned, dragging a hand through his hair as he paced the dusty floor. *“The whole area? During a total lockdown? You have to be kidding me!”*

When he finally hung up, his shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Don't keep us in suspense," Javed said, eyebrows raised. "Did your wife find out we're here?"

Faheem shook his head, too stressed to even manage a laugh. *"Remember that internet issue I mentioned? It just became a catastrophe. The main server at DB Mall crashed. A huge part of Bhopal is offline. You know I'm a business partner at Nyak Technologies; we were one of the first to bring optical fiber to this city."*

"That's rough," Sudeep said, whistling low.

"Kids can't game, students can't study, and the entire CCTV system is dark," Faheem continued, ticking off problems on his fingers. "Everyone is panicking about security."

"Can't someone just reset it remotely?" I asked, the gears in my mind already turning.

Faheem threw his hands up in frustration. *"Our software guys are all quarantined! Someone has to physically reset the server, but with this lockdown, no one can get into DB Mall."*

Javed nudged me with his elbow, a mischievous glint in his eye. *"Hey, Mr. Corrosion Engineer, who secretly loves computers more than corrosion science," he teased. "You always talk a big game about your tech skills. Time to prove it."*

I stood, crushing my cigarette under my heel, a confident smile spreading across my face. *"Challenge accepted."* I cracked my knuckles dramatically. *"Bhopal needs internet? Internet is what it's going to get."*

After dinner distribution, we colonized a corner of Mr. Golden's office, the glow of our laptops painting our tired faces. The clock on the wall ticked past 9 p.m. and kept going. Faheem paced relentlessly, muttering calculations. Sudeep was

so focused on his coding that he seemed to have forgotten how to blink. Javed, meanwhile, lounged in his chair, a picture of calm in the crisis.

"You know," Javed announced to no one in particular, *"scientists say if you stare at a screen too long, your brain turns to mush."*

Without missing a beat, fingers still flying across the keyboard, I shot back, *"Lucky for you, Javed. You need a brain first for it to turn to mush."*

"Ouch!" Sudeep snickered, looking up for the first time in an hour. *"He got you there, bro."*

Javed clutched his chest. *"Wounded! Mortally wounded by words!"*

I tried to hide my smile, focusing on the problem. The digital lifeline for several neighborhoods was hanging by a thread, and we were the only ones holding it.

"Any brilliant ideas yet, Tech Superhero?" Javed asked, spinning in his chair. *"Gonna wave your magic keyboard and—poof!—internet for everyone?"*

I leaned back, stretching my arms high above my head. *"Magic? Please. When you're this good, you don't need magic."* I winked, my confident tone a thin mask for the pressure I felt.

Hours melted away. Tea cups multiplied. Takeout containers piled up. Still no solution.

Then, at exactly 4:30 a.m., the office door creaked open. Mr. Farooq, our kitchen team leader, shuffled in, his eyes half-closed. Javed, who had been dozing off, nearly toppled from his chair.

“What in the world are you boys still doing here?” Mr. Farooq asked, his thick Bhopali accent more pronounced with sleepiness. *“All-night gaming party, eh?”*

Sudeep burst into the kind of uncontrollable laughter that only sleep deprivation can produce. *“Yes, sir! Just reached level ‘Bloodshot Eyes’!”*

“Mr. Farooq, we’re saving Bhopal from the digital dark ages,” I said, standing to stretch, my back cracking in protest. *“Half the city has no internet. We are the knights in shining armor.”*

“More like digital zombies,” Javed mumbled into his collar.

Mr. Farooq shook his head, his mustache twitching with amusement. *“Seven hours, and you tech whizzes still can’t fix it? In my day, we’d just give the TV a good whack—”* he demonstrated with a firm slapping motion, *“—say ‘Bismillah,’ and boom! Problem solved!”*

He shuffled off to the kitchen, leaving us in fits of laughter.

“Should we try his method?” Javed suggested, raising a hand toward my laptop.

“Touch that computer and your personal internet will be permanently disconnected,” I threatened with a mock glare.

As the first hint of dawn colored the sky, the solution hit me with the force of a physical blow. *“Guys, we’re overthinking this,”* I announced, standing abruptly. *“We have to physically reset the main server at DB Mall. There’s no other way.”*

Faheem looked at me like I’d grown a second head. *“Have you forgotten about the lockdown? The police won’t let anyone near that mall.”*

I smiled, the kind of smile that made my friends both excited and nervous. *“Leave that to me.”*

After distributing lunch, the four of us headed to DB Mall, armed with nothing but our wits. A stern-faced police officer blocked our path, his hand raised like a traffic signal.

“Turn around, gentlemen,” he ordered. “The mall is closed during lockdown.”

I stepped forward. *“Officer, I understand you have a job to do,”* I began, my voice calm but firm. *“But right now, thousands of people are without internet. Students can’t attend class, businesses can’t operate, and security systems are offline.”*

The officer hesitated, his expression unyielding. *“Rules are rules.”*

We all insisted, *“But, Officer, this is an emergency!”*

He snapped, his patience gone. *“Go back!”*

A wave of humiliation washed over us as we turned and walked away.

The next morning, Mr. Rehan Golden listened to our story, his fingers steepled under his chin. When we finished, he leaned forward, his eyes full of resolve.

“Don’t worry,” he said with quiet authority. “I’ll handle the permissions. By tomorrow, you’ll be in that mall. I know you boys will get our city back online.”

Rehan was as good as his word. By afternoon, we had the official clearance. Faheem and I entered the mall, and the silence was immediate and absolute. Sunlight struggled through the dusty glass roof, illuminating hallways that stood empty and frozen in time. Our footsteps echoed in the vast, dead space. In the abandoned basement parking lot, a stray cat zipped past, causing Faheem to jump.

I placed a steady hand on his shoulder. *“Easy, Faheem. We’ve faced tougher things than a cat. Let’s focus.”* I couldn’t

help but laugh as I patted his back. *“Easy there, tiger. If a cat spooks you, how will you handle the server room?”*

“Very funny,” Faheem muttered, straightening his shirt with as much dignity as he could muster.

Inside the server room, we worked in tandem, rebooting systems and running diagnostics. After three intense hours, the main server finally hummed back to life.

“We did it,” Faheem whispered, as if speaking too loudly might break it again.

I grinned, giving him a high-five. *“Was there ever any doubt?”*

When we returned to the office, exhausted but triumphant, Javed and Sudeep were waiting, pretending to look bored.

“Took you long enough,” Javed drawled, though the relief in his eyes betrayed him. *“Did Faiz have to sweet-talk the server into working again?”*

I dropped dramatically into a chair. *“The server took one look at my face and decided it was easier to just start working than to face my wrath.”*

Mr. Golden entered the room, a warm smile on his face as we recounted our adventure. *“This,”* he said proudly, *“is what makes me honored to work with you all. In these times, even something like fixing the internet becomes a crucial service to our community.”*

Javed raised an imaginary glass. *“To the unsung heroes of Bhopal! May our Wi-Fi signals always be strong, and may Mr. Golden reward us with a grand celebration for our heroic deeds!”*

We all laughed, the tension of the past day melting away like ice cream in the Bhopal summer heat.

The very next day, Faheem received a call that would take our mission in an unexpected direction.

“Your technical team often visits our area,” the grateful customer said. “Could they possibly deliver some bread and milk when they come? We can’t leave our homes, and we’re willing to pay extra.”

Faheem’s response came without hesitation. *“No need for extra payment. We’re part of Mr. Golden’s team—we help where we can. Let me see what we can arrange.”*

That evening, Faheem found me, his eyes bright with a new kind of purpose. *“Faiz, you’re the problem-solver. How can we make this work?”*

I snapped my fingers, a plan already forming. *“I know the owner of A One Bread Company. One phone call is all it will take.”*

From that day forward, Faheem’s technical team began delivering not just internet solutions but also bread, milk, and essential food items to quarantined colonies across Bhopal. Unlike Mr. Golden’s charity efforts, they charged only the actual price—no markup, no handouts—striking a balance between business and compassion.

What began as a mission to fix a crashed server had organically transformed into something more meaningful—a lifeline for a city under lockdown, proving that sometimes, the most heroic acts aren’t about saving the world, but simply connecting it, one home at a time.





29. A Child's Body, a Father's Arms, Sold Jewelry: A New Mission

Sorrow was a physical weight in Mr. Rehan Golden's office that summer day. It seemed to choke the air, to make the very walls hold their breath. He sat motionless at his desk, hands trembling as he carefully unfolded a small, worn cloth. Inside lay his wife's most precious belongings: gold bangles, delicate earrings, pieces of a life they had built together. Each one held a memory, a laugh, a whisper of love. Now, they were his last hope.

Across from him, a man in his mid-forties examined each piece with quiet scrutiny, murmuring numbers under his breath. The words barely reached our ears, lost in the heavy silence. Even as we worked in the kitchen, our eyes kept drifting toward Rehan, our hearts breaking for him.

The kitchen—the lifeline for so many—was struggling to survive. The cost of flour, sugar, tea, even the simplest loaf of bread had doubled, then tripled. The Golden family had already emptied their own storerooms, every sack of wheat and grain of rice gone. Savings had vanished. Debts piled up like storm clouds, pressing down on them. No bank would lend, and no friend could help. And so, with no other choice, Rehan had brought his wife's jewelry—the last remnants of their personal happiness—to sell. Just to keep the kitchen running. Just to feed a few more mouths.

The man finally nodded, counting out a stack of notes. The moment the cash touched Rehan's palm, his shoulders slumped as if a string holding him upright had been cut. The buyer left, and the silence that rushed in was a physical blow. Slowly, Rehan turned to us, his face a mask of exhaustion, his eyes hollow.

"We have enough," he said softly, his voice cracking. *"For two, maybe three more weeks."*

No one spoke. The unspoken question hung between us like a blade: *And then what?*

Seeing our fear, Rehan forced a weak smile. *"Don't worry,"* he whispered. *"We'll find a way. We have to."*

But we all knew. The money wouldn't last. The debts wouldn't disappear. The world wouldn't suddenly grow kinder.

He sank back into his chair, staring at the money as if it were poison. Then, without warning, his shoulders began to shake. Silent tears carved paths down his face. None of us moved. None of us breathed. After a long, heavy moment, he wiped his cheeks with a rough swipe of his hand, stood, and walked out of the room without a word.

Sudeep leaned close, his voice barely audible. *"How much more pain can one man bear?"*

I swallowed hard, my throat burning. *"I don't know."*

We returned to our work, our minds a thousand miles away.

Half an hour later, Rehan came back, speaking quietly with Farooq about food supplies when his phone rang sharply. He answered, his voice a monotone of fatigue. *"Okay. I'll check."* Hanging up, he immediately dialed another number. No answer. Again. And again. With each failed attempt, the lines on his forehead deepened.

Farooq frowned. *"Is everything alright?"*

Rehan rubbed his temples. *"A child's body was supposed to arrive at the graveyard at 1 PM. It's 6 PM now. No one has come. Amir called me—he doesn't know where the family is. I've tried calling them, but... nothing."*

Without another word, Rehan and Farooq left for the graveyard.

On the way, their headlights caught a figure walking slowly along the roadside, a small, slumped shape draped over his shoulder. As they drew closer, a cold dread twisted in their stomachs. It was a child—a small, lifeless boy, no older than six or seven. The man carrying him was his father, stumbling under the combined weight of his son's body and his grief. A few men followed behind, heads bowed, their silence louder than any cry.

Rehan stopped the car, his heart shattering. The father recognized him and approached, his voice breaking. *"We waited for hours... A relative promised to bring a car, but... no one came. We don't have money for a private vehicle."*

Without hesitation, Rehan asked Farooq to step out. *"Please,"* he said gently to the father, *"come with us."*

The Birth of a Promise

After the burial, the small group stood together, the weight of the moment pressing down on them. Amir, the graveyard team leader, was trembling with rage. *"Even the child's own relatives couldn't help carry his body!"* His voice shook. *"He didn't even die of COVID—he had kidney problems. And yet... this is how he was brought here?"*

Rehan stood silent, his face pale, his fists clenched. Then, in a voice raw with pain but forged in resolve, he said, *"This will not happen again."*

A heavy pause. Then—

“We will start a free ambulance service. For the sick. For the dead. For those who have no one.”

The words struck like lightning. Everyone froze. The kitchen was barely surviving. The graveyard expenses were overwhelming. Rehan was drowning in debt. And yet—here he was, making another impossible promise.

Sudeep turned to me, his eyes wide. *“How... how can we do this?”*

I shook my head, my chest aching with a terrible awe. *“I don't know. But if anyone can... it's him.”*

That day, something shifted inside all of us. Fear still lingered, but so did something stronger. Because in that moment, we saw exactly who Mr. Rehan Golden was.

A man who sold his wife's jewelry to feed strangers.

A man who stopped his car for a grieving father carrying his child's body on the side of a road.

A man who, even while drowning in his own suffering, saw the suffering of others—and refused to look away.

That was why we followed him.

That was why he wasn't just our leader.

He was our Golden.





A memorable photo of the free ambulance launch day.



30. Ahirpura Red Zone Victory Sparks a Dangerous Jungle Mission

The lockdown had drained the life out of the city. Empty streets echoed with the wails of ambulances—sharp, lonely sounds that lingered in the air like lost spirits.

At a police checkpoint on Shabban Lane, TI Virendra Singh Chouhan sat on a plastic chair, sweating in his uniform beside a few of his constables. His eyes traced the empty four-lane road, its stillness suffocating. Then he saw it—a flicker of movement, small and slow, fighting against a dead world.

An old woman. Bent like a crushed flower. Her feet shuffled, each step a small war she was determined to win. The sun burned her hunched back. The bag in her hand pulled her closer to the scorching pavement. Virendra's heart pounded against his ribs. He ran.

“Mataji (Mother),” he called softly, his tone reserved for his own grandmother. “Why walk alone? The volunteers should deliver food to your home.”

She lifted her face—wrinkles like cracked earth, eyes milky with exhaustion. But when they met his, a spark flickered to life.

“Beta (Son),” her voice trembled like dry leaves in the wind. “No one dares to come to our area. They call it too dangerous. We... we have been forgotten.”

Her words cut deeper than any blade. *“Where’s home, Mataji?”*

“Ahir Pura.”

Cold fear crawled down his neck. A red zone. Sealed. Forgotten. A place where even the police hesitated to go. But her trembling hands held no fear—only a fragile trust.

Virendra took her bag, its contents shifting within—a few meager vegetables, a testament to her struggle. *“I’ll walk you home,”* he said, his voice firm, *“and I will make sure you are not forgotten.”*

The empty streets heard her story—a lost son, a dying husband, nights spent counting hunger pangs. Each word carved itself into Virendra’s bones. By the time they reached her crumbling door, a fire had been lit in his soul.

That evening, Virendra stood before Rehan Golden. Before he could even finish speaking, Rehan’s fists were clenched.

“We’ll get food to Ahir Pura,” Rehan snapped. *“But the barricades—they’re sealed tight!”*

“I’ll make sure the way is open for you,” Virendra interrupted, his voice like steel. *“Just give the word.”*

Silence hung heavy between them—two men holding up a collapsing sky.

“What you’re doing...” Virendra’s throat tightened. *“It’s not courage. It’s... love.”*

Rehan shook his head, his eyes glistening. *“Your hands opened the path. Together... we’ll turn forgotten back into remembered.”*

The next morning, Rehan led us into Ahir Pura. Just as Virendra had promised, the barricades were gone. My own chest tightened as we stepped into the forbidden zone—but instead of the fear I expected, hollow eyes met us with a raw, desperate hope.

The first house we approached seemed to sag under the weight of its own decay. A young widow answered our knock, her children’s stick-thin arms clinging to her legs. Their small bellies were swollen from hunger.

“Three days since my babies ate,” the mother whispered, her lips cracked like parched earth. The children stared at our food bags with an almost feral intensity.

When we handed her a sack of rice, the little girl’s tiny fingers brushed mine. Her smile, so unexpected in that desolate place, broke my heart. The mother clutched the food, tears cutting clean paths through the dust on her cheeks. *“You’ve kept my children alive,”* she choked out.

At the next house, the old woman from the roadside waited. *“Beta,”* she rasped, gripping Rehan’s hand tightly. *“Stay. Let me feed you. Let me bless you.”*

We couldn’t, as much as we wanted to. But her whispered words chased us as we left: *“You’re God’s angels. Walk safely.”*

Every home we visited shattered me a little more. Every story we heard somehow rebuilt us with a fiercer resolve. We saw a pregnant woman cradling her belly, a grandfather who seemed to have forgotten his own name, and migrant workers with hands raw and voices broken by hardship. By dusk, we had fed

500 families. But in truth, they had fed us too—with a profound sense of purpose.

Back at Golden's office, Rehan waited. Other teams started to arrive, later than us, from the different locations they had visited. Their faces shouted what our hearts already knew—hunger doesn't wait. When the last team finally stumbled in, Rehan's tears mirrored our own.

"Today," he said, his voice raw with emotion, "you didn't just fill stomachs. You gave fathers back their pride. You made mothers feel seen. You pulled children from the very jaws of death."

The room fell into a deep, respectful silence. Then, Rehan's jaw tightened.

"There's something else I need to discuss with everyone," he said, his tone dropping low, serious. "I just got a call from my brother, Imran. He's in Makodia village."

A pause stretched, feeling like a lifetime.

"The situation there is... desperate."

The air in the room grew heavy. Makodia wasn't just far—it was isolated. A village perched precariously on a mountain, almost completely cut off from the rest of the world.

"They need medicines—ORS, insulin, heart pills. Food—daal, sugar, salt. Everything," Rehan's gaze swept over us, unflinching. "And we have a problem."

Silence again, thick and anxious.

"Our vehicle pass has expired. Getting a new one will take time. I've applied for an emergency pass—if we're lucky, we'll have it by the 18th or 19th. Once we do... we leave immediately."

A murmur of unease rippled through our group. Then—

“There’s more.”

Rehan’s voice was like steel. *“The usual road to Makodia is blocked. The only way in... is through the jungle.”*

A sharp, collective inhale. Someone in the room whispered, *“The jungle?”*

“Yes.” Rehan’s eyes were unyielding, meeting ours. *“There have been sightings. Tigers. Bears. It’s dangerous. But we don’t have a choice.”*

The room held its breath, the weight of his words pressing down on us.

Then, from the back, Aamir’s voice cut through the tension—*“So... do we get tiger insurance with this?”*

A ripple of nervous laughter broke the spell. But beneath it, I felt something stronger, something unbreakable taking root in all of us.

We would go.

The next two days were a blur of activity. Medicines were gathered. Food was packed. The truck was loaded. And through it all, Rehan moved like a man possessed—calm, focused, unwavering.

Then, on the evening of the 18th, he walked in, holding a single piece of paper like it was a lifeline.

“We have the pass,” he announced, and a wave of relief and anticipation washed over me. *“Tomorrow... we leave at 11.”*

That night, under a sky painted gold by the setting sun, we packed the last of the supplies. The road ahead was uncertain. The jungle was waiting.

But we were ready. Because Makodia needed us.

And we would make sure that the people of Makodia would not be forgotten.



A DD News Indian National News Channel interview photo shows Virendra Singh Chouhan reflecting on COVID-19's impact as life returned to normal. He highlighted Jahangirabad as India's second most infected area and praised Rehan Golden and his team for their humanitarian efforts.



A memorable photo captured during a News 18 Urdu broadcast shows Mr. Golden explaining to the reporter how difficult the situation is for the graveyard team.



31. Into the Storm: Makodia – Rain, Ghosts, and Unlikely Friendship

Tension was a low hum in our office as June 19, 2020, drew near. Everyone buzzed about the upcoming mission: The date was June 19, 2020. The mission was Makodia—a remote village, cut off by the lockdown. The normal road was blocked. The only other way in was a dangerous path through the jungle. They needed food. Medicine. Hope.

Mr. Rehan Golden moved through the chaos like a storm in human form. His hawk-like eyes missed nothing. His voice sliced through the noise—quiet but firm. He called six names. Mine was first.

“Faiz. Aadil. Aamir. Daud. Sudeep. Aatif.”

We stood before him, our spines like steel.

“This isn’t a victory march,” he warned, his eyes studying our faces. “This mission will push you to your absolute limits.”

His gaze rested on me, and I felt his unspoken trust settle over me—armor I hadn’t yet earned.

The others joked nervously. I just stared at my trembling hands. This was why I had joined. To answer the question gnawing at my soul: *When the world breaks, do you crumble, or do you stand firm?*

We planned to leave at 11 a.m. Nature had other plans.

At 2 a.m., the sky cracked open. A heavy downpour drowned the city and our hopes. Bhopal was buried under 126.2 mm of rain in a single day—the worst storm in a decade.

Breakfast was a disaster of burnt eggs and rubbery flatbreads. Every bite tasted like ash. Every swallow whispered the same question: *Are we heading toward ruin?* I chewed slowly. Fear was natural. Quitting was not an option.

Aamir forced a grin. “*Who knew pathology would send me on a ghost ride?*” His smile wavered, real fear in his eyes.

Sudeep snorted. “*Ghost ride? Call it a jungle safari. Sounds cooler.*”

Aamir leaned in, his voice low. “*Sudeep bhaiya (brother), you know about animals. But this jungle hides more than beasts.*”

Aadil’s fist slammed the table. Cups rattled. “*Enough stories! Focus! We’re not kids at a campfire!*”

Mr. Golden strode in as if he owned the storm itself—calm, unshaken. He unfolded a crumpled map. “*Turn right past the Raisen Road beer factory. Keep the river on your left.*” His nail scraped the paper, tracing the route. “*Seven kilometers in, take the mountain trail right. Makodia is four kilometers from there. The road is dangerous. Drive carefully. Stay sharp.*”

His stare weighed on each of us.

When we grabbed our bags, the office gathered to watch, their faces a mixture of pride and dread, as if sending warriors into battle. Sudeep wiped rain from his face, grinning weakly. “*Never felt this needed before.*”

Aamir’s laugh was a hollow sound. “*They’re probably thinking, ‘This is the last time we’ll see them alive!’*”

Aatif hooked an arm around Aamir's neck, smirking. *"Keep it up, and I'll donate your face to the pathology lab. They'll run screaming."*

The Scorpio's engine growled. Beneath our nervous laughter, fear and excitement pulsed like a hidden drum as we charged into the storm.

By 5 p.m., the rain still hammered down. We had to go. We squeezed into the Scorpio, shivering in wet clothes. The truck jolted over flooded, broken roads. Every pothole was a shock that rattled our bones.

Sudeep broke the silence. *"Okay, Aamir. What's this ghost story? Tell us."*

Aamir leaned back, his eyes gleaming in the gloom. *"They say a ghost haunts this jungle. A woman. She calls your name, asks if you need anything. Answer her, and you vanish forever. Or you wake up three days later, insane."*

"That's just a story people told before Netflix," Sudeep said, but the tremor in his voice betrayed him.

We passed LNCT College, fog covering the fields. The world outside felt distant. Just six of us against the growing dark.

By 7 p.m., we reached the turn-off. The road vanished. Just mud. Thick and slippery. Rain hammered the roof. Headlights cut a weak path into the blackness. The jungle pressed in, trees looming like giants.

Aadil gripped the wheel, his knuckles white. *"Watch out!"* he yelled. *"One wrong move and we're stuck here forever!"*

In the dim dashboard light, I saw my friends:

- **Sudeep**, staring ahead, trying to solve the puzzle of the road.

- **Aamir**, smile gone, flinching at every sound from the dark.
- **Aatif**, humming softly, his fists clenched tight.
- **Daud**, silent, gripping his seatbelt like a lifeline.

The jungle grew thicker. Somewhere ahead, Makodia waited—a tiny spark in the crushing dark. The legend of the churail—a vengeful female spirit—wrapped around us like an icy breath.

But we pushed forward.

Bravery isn't having no fear. It's taking a step when your legs have turned to stone



Jungle Night: Terror's Grip

By 10 p.m., the jungle's darkness swallowed us. The rain crashed down, drowning out all other sound. Inside the Scorpio, our earlier excitement was gone, replaced by a thick, choking fear.

Aamir hugged himself, his voice small. *"Anyone else feel... like we're the last people on Earth?"*

No one replied. The thought of wild animals—or the ghost from his stories—felt terrifyingly real now.

Then—THUD! The Scorpio lurched violently and stalled. We were stuck in the deep mud.

"Come on, come on!" Aadil growled, wrenching the steering wheel, but the tires only spun, burying us deeper. After a long moment, he exhaled sharply. *"No choice. We have to push."*

The eerie silence, broken only by rain hammering the roof, made our fear worse. No one wanted to step into the dark.

"What if a tiger's out there... hungry for city meat?" Aamir joked, but his laugh sounded hollow and fake. No one smiled.

I stared at my friends and took a steadying breath. *Be their rock*, I told myself. *"We do this together,"* I said, my voice as calm as I could make it. Panic kills faster than mud. We've survived worse. We'll survive this.

We stumbled out into the storm. Thick mud clawed at our shoes and rain stabbed our skin like icy needles. We put our shoulders against the Scorpio and pushed with all our might. Nothing. Then, a scream cut through the night. Animal? Human? We froze, our blood turning to ice.

Sudeep's teeth chattered. *"If we die here..."*

Daud finished the thought, his voice hollow. *"...no one will ever find us."*

I stepped forward, my boots sinking. *"Listen to me. We are not giving up. Not now. Our mission is too important. If we let fear win, we're finished. If we stay focused, we will get out of this."*

Time dragged on. Our desperate mission had become a simple fight to survive. Aatif wiped rain from his face with a trembling hand. *"If we had a rope, we could pull from the back."*

"A rope would help," Aadil replied, staring into the complete darkness. *"But where are we going to find one out here?"* His shoulders slumped.

"Well, maybe we can ask that ghost lady for one?" Aamir's joke didn't land.

After two exhausting hours, we collapsed back inside the Scorpio, drenched and defeated. *"We're not getting this thing out,"* Aadil said, raindrops on his face looking like tears. *"We have to make a choice: walk or wait."*

"We walk to the village," Aatif said, his voice thin but hopeful. "Can't be that far, right?"

Daud shook his head. *"In this mud? We'll be crawling, not walking."* Animal cries echoed closer in the dark. Staying felt like waiting to be hunted.

"We move," I said, my voice louder than I felt. "Waiting here is too dangerous."

We grabbed our flashlights and what was left of our supplies and pushed back into the storm. Rain slapped our faces while the mud gripped our boots like hungry hands. Forty minutes later, we had barely moved a hundred feet.

Fear was eating us alive. Every rustle in the bushes made our hearts jump. Sudeep trembled beside me. *"This is a nightmare. It feels like we're in a horror movie."*

Aatif squeezed his shoulder. *"We're together. That's all that matters."*

We pushed on, but after a while, a terrible feeling set in. The jungle looked the same in every direction. The rain had washed away our tracks. *"That tree!"* Daud shouted, his voice breaking with panic. *"We passed it already! We're going in circles!"*

"All the trees look the same!" Aatif snapped back, his own fear rising.

After another hour lost in the dark, we stumbled upon the Scorpio again—half-buried in the mud like a tomb. *"We have to stay here till morning,"* Aatif begged.

Aadil, however, shook his head, his determination a fire in the dark. *"No. We have to tell the village what happened, and we have to reach Mr. Golden. We need help."* He scanned the darkness. *"We have to find higher ground. A place where a phone might work."*

Leaving the shelter of the car again felt like madness, but after a few minutes of rest, we followed him back into the storm.

Aamir's teeth chattered. *"I thought the worst part of this trip would be Sudeep's snoring."*

A weak laugh escaped us. Sudeep nudged him. *"Survive this, and I'll snore in your ear every night as a reward."*

Aadil led the way, his flashlight beam cutting through the darkness. *"We just need to find higher ground,"* he repeated, as much to himself as to us. We climbed a small, muddy hill, vines slapping our faces, our wet clothes heavy as lead. At the top, Aadil raised his phone, his hand shaking.

"Anything?" Daud asked, his voice a tight whisper of hope and fear.



Deep Jungle Shadow: A Mysterious Presence

Aadil stared at his phone, his face a mask of stone. *"Nothing. Not a single bar."* He slammed a fist against his thigh. The sound was swallowed by the storm. We were trapped.

Aatif hugged himself, his voice sharp with frustration. *"We have to go back to the truck. It's our only shelter!"*

We stumbled back to the Scorpio, slipping on the mud, our bodies heavy with exhaustion. The truck's interior felt like a cold, wet tomb. Aatif rubbed his numb hands together, his breath visible in the chill. *"At least here... we're not bait for whatever's out there."*

Sudeep glared out the window, his eyes darting across the inky darkness. *"And if the rain never stops? What if we're stuck here for days? What if... we never get a signal?"*

Aadil's jaw flexed, his resolve warring with doubt. *"We rest now. Try again at dawn. We keep moving."*

He gripped his phone like it was the last thread to the world. *"We need a signal. Even if I have to walk all night—"*

"Walk where?" Daud exploded, throwing his hands up. *"We've tried every hill, every path! It's just more jungle! More rain! More nothing!"*

Aadil said nothing, his silence louder than the storm.

Aamir leaned forward, his usual smirk replaced by a grim stare. *"This is bad. Real bad. But dying here? No. We've crawled through worse. Right?"* His hands shook as he spoke, but his words hung in the air like a fragile lifeline.

We sat in the oppressive darkness, the rain still hammering the roof, lost in grim thoughts. Then, a tiny beep cut through the rain. Aadil's phone. We all froze. He snatched it, his movements sharp with desperate hope, and held it to the window. *"One bar,"* he breathed.

He quickly typed a message to Mr. Golden: *Stuck in jungle. Need help.* He hit send, and we all held our breath, watching the agonizingly slow loading circle. It spun and spun, then vanished. No delivery report. We had no idea if the message had gone through.

"We have to keep trying," Aadil declared, new resolve in his voice. He sat straighter, a flicker of renewed energy in his weary frame. *"Let's rest a bit, then try for a stronger signal. We are not giving up. Not now. Not ever."*

As we huddled together, seeking warmth and drawing strength from each other, Aamir suddenly stiffened. *"What's that shadow?"* his voice trembled as he pointed into the darkness.

"Aamir, not now," I snapped, my own nerves fraying.

"I'm not joking. Look. Something's moving."

Reluctantly, we peered out. In the dying glow of our headlights, we saw it: a figure moving between the trees. Tall. Too still to be an animal. My blood ran cold.

"It's just a deer," Aatif said, though his white-knuckled grip on the seat betrayed him.

"A deer?" Aamir whispered back. *"A deer that looks like a person?"*

"Stop it, both of you!" Aadil commanded, though even he couldn't look away from the unsettling shadow as it seemed to glide between the trees.

Then a scream tore through the night—sharp and blood-curdling. We flinched, grabbing each other's arms.

Sudeep swallowed hard. *"That's just a barn owl."* But his eyes darted around like trapped birds.

Another scream echoed, closer this time. Aamir stiffened. *"Since when do owls sound like that?"*

"Shut up, Aamir!" Daud snapped, his own voice trembling.

Without a word, Aadil threw open the door and climbed onto the Scorpio's roof, boots slipping on the wet metal.

"Aadil, what are you doing?!" I yelled over the storm.

"Resending the message!" he shouted back, holding the phone high. *"One bar is enough!"*

We watched, our breath held, as he stabbed at the screen. The loading circle spun. Seconds felt like hours.

Then—buzz.

Aadil's voice cracked as he read the reply aloud: *"Don't worry. Village has been informed. Help is on the way."*

Silence. Then Sudeep let out a choked sob. Aamir punched the air, his laugh raw. *“We’re saved!”*

But Aadil’s smile faded as another scream ripped through the trees—closer, hungrier. He slid back into the car, rain dripping from his hair. *“They’re coming. But we stay alert. Until help arrives... we don’t let our guard down.”*

Aatif hugged himself, staring into the dark. *“What if help arrives too late?”*

“Then we fight,” Aadil said, his voice like steel. *“Together.”*

The headlights flickered. Shadows swayed beyond the glass. Strange sounds haunted us through the long night. Every rustle, every crack of a twig made our hearts leap into our throats.



Angel of Hope: Light in the Darkness

Mr. Golden’s reply was a lifeline. A spark of hope in the crushing dark. The jungle still pressed in, the rain still hammered down, but we clung to one truth: we weren’t alone.

Hours crawled by. Hunger gnawed at our stomachs.

Daud groaned, clutching his belly. *“Ugh... should’ve packed more food. Just in case.”*

Aamir managed a tired grin. *“Yeah, ‘just in case’ we decided to take a vacation in the mud?”* His joke hung weakly in the air, but it was enough to make Sudeep snort.

Our water bottles were long empty. Thirst made our throats feel like sandpaper, but no one complained. We saved our strength, listening to the rain’s endless drumming on the roof.

Then, as the black night slowly softened to gray, a new sound cut through the storm. A low, steady rumble that wasn't thunder.

We stiffened, hearts pounding.

"An engine!" Aadil yelled, his face pressed to the fogged window. *"There!"*

Through the rain and mist, a pair of headlights sliced through the darkness. A truck! Four men jumped out, ropes coiled over their shoulders. Leading them was Imran Ahmed, Mr. Golden's brother—his face calm, his voice a steady anchor in the chaos.

"Hold on! We'll get you out!"

Relief slammed into me so hard my knees buckled. Tears blurred my vision—whether from rain or joy, it didn't matter.

Imran's team worked with practiced speed, their thick ropes snaking around the Scorpio's frame. *"On my count!"* he shouted over the rain. *"Pull!"*

With a deep, sucking thud, the truck lurched free from the mud's grip. Aamir whooped with joy, Daud sagged against his seat in relief, and the weight of leadership finally slid from Aadil's shoulders.

"Thank you... thank you," I choked out, wiping my face.

Imran squeezed my shoulder, his smile kind. *"You're safe now. Let's get you to the village."*

As we followed their truck, the jungle seemed smaller, less hungry. Aamir glanced back with a smirk. *"The ghost lady must be angry we're leaving."*

Sudeep rolled his eyes. *"Save the jokes for breakfast."*

The welcome in Makodia was a tidal wave of warmth. Villagers rushed from their huts, their faces shining with a joy

that pushed back the storm clouds. A man clapped my shoulder, his grip firm. *"You made it! You brought the food and medicine!"* His voice cracked with relief.

Another villager nodded, his eyes wet. *"We prayed all night for you. Thank you."* Children peeked from behind their parents, their curious eyes wide—a sight sweeter than any dawn.

The villagers' hands, rough but gentle, helped us unload the supplies into Imran's farmhouse. Stepping inside, warmth wrapped around us like a blanket. The air was rich with the scent of cinnamon-spiced kheer and hot, crispy puris. It was the smell of home, of safety, and our empty stomachs roared in response.

"Dry clothes," Imran said, handing each of us a soft cotton tunic that felt like a hug against our rain-battered skin.

At the table, Aamir devoured a puri with a groan of pure happiness. *"Next time, I'm packing jalebis. Survival requires sugar!"* His laugh, tired but real, was echoed by our own.

I handed the box of medicines to Imran and Azhar Ali, the village elder. *"Everything's here."* My chest tightened with a storm of pride and relief.

Imran read a message from Mr. Golden aloud: *"Stay till the rain stops."* No one argued. Exhaustion was a heavy weight in our bones.

The next afternoon, sunlight finally pierced the clouds, turning the rain into a distant memory. As we packed to leave, the villagers gathered around. A little girl tugged my sleeve, her eyes bright. *"Come back soon!"* she shouted, bouncing on her toes. Her smile was brighter than the sun now drying the mud.

The back of our Scorpio was empty—no sacks of food, no boxes of medicine. But our hearts were full. That night in the

jungle had tested everything: our courage, our strength, even our sanity. But we'd also learned truths thicker than blood:

❖ **Trust:** Aadil's hands steady on the wheel, even when his voice shook.

❖ **Unity:** Sudeep's quiet focus, and Aamir's jokes stitching our frayed nerves back together.

❖ **Kindness:** Imran's calm smile, and the warm kheer he made for us, steaming and sweet.

The journey back to Bhopal was quiet, but not heavy. Aamir hummed a Bollywood tune. Daud stared out the window, a new softness in his eyes. As we drove, Aatif broke the silence. *"You think the ghost lady's still out there?"*

Sudeep snorted. *"Probably. But she's their problem now."* He jerked his thumb toward Makodia, grinning.

We laughed—real laughter, light as the sunlight dappling the road.

But beneath it, deeper than jokes, lingered the warmth of Makodia's welcome: the old man who'd clasped my hand and said, *"You brought us hope,"* the mother who'd pressed a warm puri into my palm, Imran's firm grip on my shoulder. Aadil glanced at me in the rearview mirror. *"Next time, we pack more snacks."*

"And rope," Sudeep added.

"And chili flakes," Aamir said with a wink. *"For the ghosts."*

The jungle may lie behind us, but its lessons endure: darkness can overwhelm—and light can, too, if you choose it. The monsoon will end, but the laughter, fear and courage we shared in that muddy Scorpio will outshine any shadow.



Part IV: The Cost of Courage



32. Behind Closed Doors: A Quarantined Hero's Hidden Battle

The golden light of dusk filtered through the dirty windows of Farooq's family home near the Golden Kitchen. Outside his brother's quarantine room, Farooq stood frozen. His heart screamed to break down the door, but a simple wooden barrier held him back. Inside, Mujahid—the team's pillar, the one who always smiled first and worked hardest—now lay alone, fighting for every breath against COVID-19's merciless grip.

Farooq pressed a hand to the door, his voice trembling. *"Mujahid... how are you?"*

A weak, ragged breath answered from inside. Then, Mujahid's voice—strained and soft. *"Not good, brother... Can't breathe right."* A deep cough rattled the door. *"No taste. No smell. This exhaustion... it's eating me alive."*

Farooq's knees nearly gave way. His brother was suffering, and he could do nothing but listen. The thought was a knife in his chest. He clenched his fists. *No. Be strong. For him.*

Just then, his nephew Tayyab rushed down the hall, his young face etched with pain. *"Uncle Farooq!"* he choked out, fists clenched at his sides. *"Why does it have to be like this? Why is he locked away alone? It's not fair!"*

Farooq pulled him close, gripping his shoulder hard. *"Tayyab, beta... we have to. It's the only way to protect him. And us."*

Tayyab's jaw tightened, tears spilling over. *"But I can't stand it! He's in there suffering, and we just stand here?"*

From behind the door, Mujahid's voice came again, weaker but firm. *"Tayyab... listen to me."* A pause, a struggle for air. *"This distance... it hurts me too. But if I give this sickness to you? To your Uncle Farooq? I would never forgive myself."*

Tayyab squeezed his eyes shut, his breath shuddering. *"I know... I know. But it just hurts."*

A faint smile could be heard in Mujahid's voice. *"I'll fight. I promise. But right now... the kitchen needs you. The people need you. Be strong for them."*

Tayyab wiped his face roughly and nodded. *"Okay. Okay, I will."*

Farooq pulled him into a half-embrace, his own voice thick with emotion. *"That's my boy. No, not a boy. A man."* He patted his back. *"We keep going. For them. For him."*

This sickness was a shadow over all of us. Just days before, three others from the kitchen team had fallen ill. Masks and sanitizer were little comfort when starving families pressed close, their desperation overwhelming any thought of safety.

Money was vanishing. Food stocks dwindled. Every grain of rice mattered. And Mr. Rehan Golden's free ambulance service? It wasn't just two or three helpers anymore—now, five men stood ready for every single call.

Farooq remembered the call from a few days before. A young man's voice, shaking with tears. *"Please... my grandmother—she can't breathe!"*

When the ambulance arrived, the old woman was frail but heavy, her body limp. The driver's voice was urgent. *"We need help lifting her. Now."*

But the woman's own family hesitated, paralyzed by fear. So our driver called Mr. Golden and explained the situation.

He didn't hesitate.

Mr. Golden sent the word, and his team—Aadil, Anas, Majid, Aatif, Amir the pathologist, Daud—all rushed forward. Together, they lifted her, muscles straining, sweat dripping, but their hands were gentle. Careful.

Since then, no ambulance has left without at least four to six men. Mr. Rehan's words burned in their hearts:

"We. Leave. No one. Behind."

The thought of abandoning even one life made his own hands shake with fury.

As Farooq and Tayyab walked back to the kitchen, their steps were heavy, but their resolve was like steel. The Golden Kitchen wasn't just a place that served food.

It served hope.

And as long as they stood together—no matter how hard the fight—that light would never go out.





A News 18 Urdu photo captures Mr. Rehan Golden discussing the challenges of managing Madhya Pradesh's largest graveyard, with its main gate visible on the right.



33. Golden Team at Breaking Point: New Task Adds to Frustration

One day, after returning from distributing the morning tea and toast, it was around 10:30 AM when I stood at the entrance gate with Sudeep, Kabeer, and Fahim. Our bodies ached, our backs bent with crushing exhaustion. My hands trembled slightly as I leaned against the wall for support. We had just come back from delivering food to those desperately in need.

Sudeep and I had gone through Budhwara and Itwara, handing out tea and toast not just to the hungry but also to the police officers patrolling tirelessly. Their faces were drawn tight with exhaustion, skin gray and lifeless, lips cracked and bleeding from dehydration, yet their eyes remained sharp and determined. They had not rested, had not even tasted water, but they stood firm in their duty to keep the restless crowds at bay.

“Did you see their faces?” Sudeep whispered, his voice cracking. *“The police... they look like ghosts still walking.”*

I could only nod, my throat too dry and tight to form words.

Fahim and Kabeer had just returned from the old railway station and the bus stand. Their faces, ghostly pale with fatigue, showed the same burden we all carried. Fahim's hands shook as he tried to wipe the sweat from his brow. Kabeer's eyes were bloodshot, darting nervously around the room. We exchanged

silent glances, knowing without speaking what weighed heavily on each of our minds.

One by one, the rest of the team started trickling back into the office, dragging their feet, shoulders slumped. No words were exchanged. The air was thick with unspoken fear. The silence said everything—we were all thinking the same thought.

Five of our own had fallen ill. Among them was Mujahid, Mr. Farooq's own brother. The word none of us dared say out loud hovered between us like a dark cloud: COVID-19. No one voiced it, but it was there, casting a shadow over the entire room, suffocating us in the unrelenting silence.

Kabeer finally broke the silence, his voice barely above a whisper. *"Has anyone heard about Mujahid today?"*

Nobody answered. The silence grew heavier.

The sound of the door creaking open sliced through the tension like a knife. Every eye snapped toward it, bodies tensing in unison. Mr. Farooq entered, his face drawn and haggard, dark circles under his eyes like bruises. Following behind him were Aadil, Daud, Arib Samad, and Majid. There was something in the way they walked—a heaviness, an unspoken urgency. Aadil's fists were clenched so tightly his knuckles had turned white. Daud kept swallowing repeatedly, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

Mr. Farooq didn't waste a moment. His voice was steady but somber, cutting through the thick air.

"Mr. Rehan Golden has called for a meeting. 1 PM. Everyone must attend. "His eyes scanned the room, lingering on each face. 'No exceptions,' he said firmly—except the ambulance team."

The room shifted. Bodies stiffened. Nervous glances were exchanged. Some people gasped audibly. A meeting of all of

us? That was out of the ordinary. Mr. Golden usually addressed us in smaller groups. If he was calling everyone together now, it could only mean one thing: something serious was happening. Something worse than what we already knew.

“What’s it about?” someone dared to ask from the back.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Mr. Farooq answered, his voice tight with strain.

By 12:45, we had all gathered—everyone except the ambulance team: Adnan Anwar, Aatif, Anas Khan, Shoaib, and Mohd Faheem. They were still out there, somewhere, braving the streets. Somewhere in the city, they were lifting patients—some still clinging to life, some already lost to the virus. Their absence was a constant reminder of the grim reality we were all drowning in. Theirs was a task none of us could imagine, but we all felt the weight of it.

The waiting was unbearable. People shifted from foot to foot, unable to stay still. Some bit their nails nervously. Others stared blankly at the walls. The air felt thick, almost too heavy to breathe.

At exactly 1 PM, the door opened again. The hinges squealed in protest, making several of us jump. Mr. Rehan Golden entered, and instantly, the air shifted. His usual calm was gone, replaced by a quiet intensity that seemed to shrink the room around us. Deep lines etched his forehead. His jaw was clenched tight, teeth grinding visibly. Amir, the leader of the graveyard team, followed close behind, with Javed Qureshi and Salman at his side. They brought with them the gravity of what was to come. Amir’s hands were stained with dirt, a grim reminder of the day’s work. Javed’s eyes were red-rimmed, haunted by things none of us wanted to imagine.

We sat on the floor in a semi-circle, grabbing whatever cushion or mat we could find. All eyes were on Mr. Golden, and the

silence was deafening. Someone's stomach growled loudly in the quiet room, but nobody laughed. Nobody even smiled.

His voice, though steady, carried a weight that none of us could escape. *"We are in a very tough time,"* he began, his gaze sharp, cutting through the room as it landed on each one of us. His hands trembled slightly before he clasped them together to hide it. *"This is harder than any war. In war, you can see your enemy. But this... this virus... it's invisible. And that makes it more dangerous."*

His words hit like a hammer. Several people flinched visibly. The room seemed to tremble with the weight of what we all knew but hadn't said aloud. We had been fighting an unseen enemy for months, but now it felt like the enemy was winning.

He continued, his voice hard, cutting through the suffocating tension. *"Five of our strongest are down. They were out there, doing what we do—feeding the people, interacting with the crowds. We cannot lose anyone else."*

His fist came down suddenly on the table beside him, making us all jump. *"We have to protect ourselves as much as we protect others."*

The impact of his words was like a knife. It cut deep because we all knew the truth in it. We had been so focused on the mission—on helping, on serving—that we had forgotten our own well-being.

Aadil Irshad shot to his feet, unable to contain himself any longer. His face was flushed with emotion, veins bulging at his temples. *"Uncle, it's almost impossible to control the crowds when we're distributing food!"* His voice cracked with frustration. *"People are starving. They're desperate! They rush at us like... like they're drowning, and we're their last breath of air. Yesterday, they nearly trampled Kabeer!"* He gestured

wildly with his hands. *"How can we keep distance when they're clawing at us for food?"*

Mr. Golden's face softened, a flicker of empathy breaking through his intense expression. He took a deep breath, shoulders rising and falling slowly. *"I know, Aadil. I know it's hard."* His voice gentled slightly. *"But we have to find a way. Maybe barriers, ropes... something to keep the crowds at a distance. A token system to regulate them, or staggering the distribution times."*

Aadil shook his head fiercely, his doubt clear. He paced a few steps, hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. *"We can try, uncle. But when people are hungry, they don't think. They panic. They push. They..."* He trailed off, choking on his words.

"I understand," Mr. Golden replied, his tone gentle but unyielding. His eyes, however, showed the strain, the fear that matched our own. *"But we have no choice. If we fall, the entire operation falls with us."*

Then, he dropped the bombshell, his words falling into the room like stones. *"We are forming a new team,"* he said, his voice filled with a heavy determination. *"We need four people to start distributing kaada—herbal tea—and immunity-boosting supplements across the city. Vitamin C, herbal remedies—these are crucial for boosting immunity against the virus."*

The room fell into a shocked silence, then erupted in murmurs and groans. Someone in the back let out a strangled laugh of disbelief. Four more members? How? We were already stretched to the breaking point, more and more of us falling sick every day. We could barely keep up with the ambulance calls, the food distribution, and now this?

"It's too much!" someone shouted from the back. *"We're dying out there!"*

“Where will we find the time?” another voice cried out.

Mr. Golden saw the fear in our faces, the panic rising like a tide. His own expression cracked slightly, revealing the exhaustion beneath. His voice softened, almost pleading. *“I know you are overwhelmed. I know this feels impossible.”* His hands spread wide in a gesture of helplessness. *“But these supplements could save lives. People who can't get medicine—they need this. We are their only hope.”*

His words hung in the air, sinking into us like stones. The weight of the responsibility was unbearable. Faces around the room showed the struggle—some on the verge of tears, others hardened with determination, many simply blank with shock. And yet, what choice did we have?

Just then, Mr. Golden's phone rang, the harsh electronic sound making us all jump. The tension in the room snapped as he glanced at the screen, his expression changing instantly. *“It's DIG Irshad Wali,”* he said, the mention of the senior police officer bringing a fresh wave of unease. People exchanged worried glances. *“Aadil, come with me.”*

He motioned sharply to Aadil, who hesitated for just a moment before following, his shoulders stiff with tension.

And just like that, they were gone, leaving us in the room with nothing but our fears, our doubts, and the crushing silence. The door closed with a final-sounding click.

As soon as the door shut, Mayank slammed his fist against the wall, making everyone flinch. *“This is madness!”* he hissed through clenched teeth. He turned to the group, eyes wild with frustration. *“When we already assigned two for delivering medicine, why this additional team? Are they trying to kill us all?”*

Sudeep rose to his feet, placing a calming hand on Mayank's shoulder, which Mayank immediately shrugged off. "*Mr. Golden already explained, Mayank,*" Sudeep said, his voice deliberately calm, though his twitching eye betrayed his own stress. "*This new team is for distributing kaada and other supplements. They'll visit every part of the city. Of course, it's needed.*"

Mayank spun around, facing Sudeep nose to nose. "*Needed? NEEDED? What about US? What about what WE need?*" His voice rose dangerously. "*We need rest! We need protection! We need to stay ALIVE!*"

Mayank opened his mouth to shout again, but Saad physically stepped between him and Sudeep, pushing them apart with a weary strength that surprised them both.

His voice wasn't loud, but it was heavy with a bitter frustration that cut through their anger and silenced the room.

"*Whatever,*" Saad said, shaking his head. "*This argument is pointless.*"

He looked from one to the other, his own face lined with exhaustion. "*The real problem is that we are human, and we have limits. We are not machines.*" He jabbed an angry finger toward the door Mr. Golden had just exited. "*This new task is too much. The team is already past its breaking point—three of us nearly collapsed yesterday! Mr. Golden has to reconsider this decision before we all end up sick... or worse.*"

Javed, who had been quietly observing from the corner, let out a humorless laugh. He raised an eyebrow and looked at Saad with disbelief written across his face. "*Do you really think Mr. Golden ever backs down from his decisions? Have you met the man?*" He shook his head slowly. "*This is happening, whether we like it or not.*"

The room fell into a thoughtful silence as Saad's shoulders slumped in defeat. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, saying nothing more.

Minutes passed, but it felt like hours. The air grew stale with our collective fear and frustration. Some of the team stepped outside, unable to bear the pressure. Kabeer paced relentlessly, his footsteps marking time like a ticking bomb. Others stayed, lost in their thoughts, staring vacantly at the walls or floor. Mr. Farooq remained, watching over us, his face a portrait of concern, fingers drumming nervously against his thigh. We tried to plan for the day, tried to focus on the tasks at hand, but the weight of uncertainty clung to us like a shadow.

"I can't do this anymore," someone whispered. *"I just can't."*

Then, the members who had stepped out returned, huddling together in low, urgent whispers. Their faces were set with determination now, a decision clearly made. After a tense, hushed discussion, heads nodding in agreement, they made a decision. A note was written—a note to voice our fears, our concerns. Hands shook as pen met paper, words formed carefully but desperately.

Two members walked up to Mr. Farooq, handing it to him with trembling fingers. *"Sir,"* one of them said, voice barely audible. *"Please."*

He read it silently, his expression shifting—his face a mix of sadness, anger, and deep worry. His eyes widened, then narrowed. His breath caught visibly in his throat. When he finally spoke, his voice was heavy, but firm.

"I will talk to Mr. Rehan Golden," he said, the unspoken fear threading through his words. He folded the note carefully, placing it in his pocket. His hand rested there for a moment, as if the weight of the paper was too much to bear. *"I promise you that."*

But the look in his eyes told us what we already knew: promises were becoming harder and harder to keep.



A random yet memorable photo of DIG Irshad Wali and Mr. Rehan Golden standing in front of the Golden Kitchen office.



Rehan's Fiery Speech: Quitting to Commitment in One Moment

The air felt heavy around Mr. Rehan Golden and DIG Irshad Wali, thick with the grim talk of the Jhada Graveyard. The chilling quiet of the place seemed to press in. Everyone knew what needed to be done—burials for those lost to COVID-19, and fast.

“We will do whatever it takes,” DIG Wali’s voice was a low rumble, a promise made beside the waiting earth.

Together, they walked the sacred ground. Rehan pointed, his gestures heavy with the weight of their task, mapping out where the fallen would rest. Soon, the DIG had to leave. As Rehan turned, Amir, the graveyard team’s leader, hurried toward him. Raw fear was etched on Amir’s face.

“*Rehan Sir!*” Amir’s voice trembled, loud enough to cut through the silence. “*The PPE kits... we’re almost out!*”

Rehan’s nod was slow, grim. He turned to Aadil, the man who sourced their lifeline supplies. “*Aadil, what’s happening? We needed those kits yesterday.*”

Aadil let out a breath heavy with defeat, his frustration hanging in the air. “*They’re bleeding us dry,*” he explained, his voice tight with anger. “*The sellers know we’re desperate. Asking five times the price... One shopkeeper might give them for double, but it will take days we don’t have.*”

Rehan listened, his face a calm mask over the storm surely brewing inside. He put a firm hand on Aadil’s shoulder, grounding him. “*Aadil,*” he said, his voice low but powerful, locking eyes with him. “*Forget the cost.*” He leaned closer, his words a solemn vow. “*Our people’s safety is everything. Five are already sick. We can’t lose more. Get the kits. Pay their price.*”

Just as Aadil nodded, relief warring with worry on his face, Rehan’s phone buzzed. He answered. As he listened, his calm suddenly shattered. A shadow washed over his strong features, a deep disturbance that shook him visibly. Aadil and Amir exchanged wide, fearful eyes, the tension suddenly thick between them.

“*Kitchen office. Now,*” Rehan commanded, his voice strained, urgent.

Wordlessly, Aadil and Amir followed, a chill running down their spines. The short ride back for them must have been thick with suffocating tension, their minds racing, fearing what horror awaited them.

The Golden Kitchen office felt like a tomb. The air itself seemed heavy with unspoken grief, pressing down on us. We

sat huddled, silent figures lost in shadow. Some stared blankly at the floor; others fought back silent tears, heads bowed under a crushing weight. Mr. Farooq stood like a statue by the door, his worry a raw thing, his eyes fixed on the entrance.

When Rehan entered, Farooq's gaze met his, glistening with unshed tears. A silent understanding seemed to pass between them. We saw it hit Rehan like a physical blow. His confident stride faltered, just for a heartbeat.

Slowly, as if wading through deep water, Rehan walked to his chair. His eyes swept across our broken forms. None of us could meet his gaze. Shame burned in some of us. The silence was a deafening roar of despair.

After a moment that stretched into eternity, Mr. Farooq stepped forward. His hand shook as he held out a single sheet of paper. Rehan took it, his own hand steady only by sheer force of will. He didn't look at it. He passed it to Aadil. "*Read it,*" he ordered, his voice barely a whisper.

Aadil's hands trembled as he unfolded the paper. He cleared his throat, but his voice cracked on the first word, thick with the emotion that choked us all. "*This letter... it's from all of us. Sir... we are so tired.*" His voice broke entirely on "*tired.*" He paused, blinking rapidly against tears. We listened, hearts sinking, hearing our own bone-deep exhaustion in his words. "*We've pushed ourselves past breaking. We haven't slept right, but we never complained. We haven't eaten right, but we never complained. Weeks of endless shifts, away from our families... we never complained.*"

Aadil's voice found a sliver of strength. "*But assigning six people to the ambulance... that broke something inside us. We stretched, each doing the work of three, of four.*" He choked again, the words catching in his throat. "*But this new medicine team... needing four more... it's too much. Sir, if this*

happens... we... we can't go on. We have to leave the Golden team."

Tears streamed freely down Aadil's face as he neared the list of names signed below—our names. Rehan raised a hand, sharp and sudden, stopping him before the names were spoken. His fingers trembled slightly in the air.

A profound silence fell, heavy and absolute. It felt like the very walls were absorbing our collective surrender. Rehan sat motionless, his chest rising and falling rapidly. We saw the weight of our words crushing him. His team, his family in this fight... us... we were giving up.

Rehan's eyes shone with unshed tears, but he fought them back. He had poured his belief in us, and now he saw the cost etched in the dark circles under our eyes, mirrored in our slumped shoulders. For a terrifying moment, he looked utterly lost. Sadness washed over him, a wave of hopelessness dimming the fire in his eyes. Seeing our leader, our anchor, look so defeated shattered something within us. Some who had signed couldn't bear it, turning away, shame burning our faces.

But then... slowly... Rehan lifted his head. We watched as his gaze found the photograph on the wall—his elder brother, Irshad Ahmed. We saw something shift, deep within him. As he looked at the face of the man who was his mentor, his guide, his inspiration... his expression changed. The despair receded. A familiar fire rekindled in his eyes, the unwavering strength we leaned on. His spine straightened. His chin lifted.

He stood abruptly, the chair scraping harshly against the floor, the sound ripping through the silence. His voice rang out, clear and strong, filling every corner of the grieving room. *"My friends,"* he began, his arms open wide, his voice thick with powerful feeling. *"My family. You stood beside me when the world seemed darkest. When fear made families turn from their*

own blood..." His fist hit the table, a soft thud of emphasis. "You stood firm. For this noble cause."

His eyes, now blazing, met each of ours. *"You have given everything. Day and night. More than anyone could ever ask. You did it without pay, driven only by the need to serve."* His voice softened, but the intensity remained. *"Whether the world notices or not, remember this: God sees."* He pointed upward. *"My brother always taught me: serving humanity is the highest calling. That duty calls us now, louder than ever."*

He paused, taking a deep, deliberate breath, letting the words anchor in our hearts. *"This fight isn't just about filling bellies anymore,"* he shook his head, the energy radiating from him now. *"Getting medicine, vital supplements to the sick... that's a lifeline too. Maybe even more critical now."* He began to pace, a caged tiger finding its strength, his energy filling the oppressive space. *"I will do whatever it takes. If tomorrow demands something else, I will do that too."*

His voice rose, vibrating with pure passion. *"Our purpose is to SAVE LIVES! Food, medicine, transport—whatever it takes! Remember the promise: 'Save one soul, and it is as if you have saved all mankind!'"*

Rehan stopped, planting his feet firmly, a pillar of resolve. *"If any one of you feels you cannot continue, you are free."* He gestured toward the door, his hand steady now. *"There is no blame in my heart. Only deep, unending thanks for everything you've given."* His voice caught, thick with sincerity that touched every soul in the room. *"But understand this: this kitchen, this service... it WILL continue. As long as there is need."*

Tears welled again, fierce and bright, but he blinked them back furiously. *"My brother did not quit his duty, not even when facing death itself. He lost his life, but he never lost his*

purpose.” His voice broke, just for an instant, raw with grief and pride. *“You can go. You can rest. But if no one stands with me, then I will carry this burden alone. I will do it all, until my last breath. I will not turn back.”* His voice was almost a roar now, aimed directly at the core of our beings. *“DO YOU HEAR ME? I WILL NOT TURN BACK!”*

He struck his chest with his fist, a resonant thud. *“Until the last breath leaves my body! Until the last coin is spent! Until the last drop of strength is gone! As long as blood flows in these veins! As long as these legs can hold me! I! WILL! NOT! TURN! BACK!”* His eyes shone with a blinding, almost terrifying determination. *“You might see me fall! You might see me broken! You might find me dead! But you will NEVER see me abandon this sacred duty! The duty my brother died upholding!”*

He finished, his face flushed, chest heaving, vibrating with the force of his vow. He stood trembling for a long moment... then suddenly swayed, his legs buckling, collapsing heavily back into his chair.

A collective gasp tore through the room. We surged to our feet as one, cries of alarm mixing with panicked shouts. Mr. Farooq and Aadil were there first, but we all rushed toward him, hands outstretched.

Rehan waved a shaky hand, struggling for breath. *“I’m okay,”* he gasped, though his face was deathly pale. *“Fine... Don’t worry.”* But worry was etched deep on every face crowded around him.

Visibly fighting for strength, he pulled himself upright again, preparing to leave. He turned back one last time, his gaze sweeping over us, lingering on each face. *“I am grateful for every single one of you,”* he said softly, his voice thick with an emotion that wrapped around our hearts. *“I’m going now.”*

Whoever needs to leave... please, go. Don't feel bad." He swallowed, the effort visible. *"Remember, no blame. Only my deepest thanks for walking this hard road with me."* His final words were barely a whisper, heavy with meaning. *"Thank you."*

He left. The silence he left behind was different now. It wasn't just despair; it was thick with shame. We looked down, fidgeted, dug fingernails into palms. Soft sounds of muffled crying broke the stillness.

But Rehan's words lingered, echoing in the heavy air. *I will not turn back.* A tiny spark had been struck in the darkness of our exhaustion. Slowly, eyes began to lift. We looked at each other. Looks filled with weariness, yes, but also... something else. A hesitant flicker of shared purpose, of remembered strength.

Then, one by one, we rose. Amir stood first, tear tracks still wet on his cheeks, but his back was ramrod straight. *"I'm staying,"* he declared, his voice rough but unbreakable. *"I'm not quitting. Not now."*

Aadil stood beside him, nodding fiercely, determination washing away his earlier tears. *"Me too. We finish what we started."*

A third stood. Then another. Voices joined, shaky at first, then gaining power. *"We're with you, Rehan!" "We won't give up!"* The very air in the room seemed to shift, to lighten. The crushing despair lifted, replaced by a fierce, burning resolve. An unbreakable bond forged in the fire of shared hardship, ignited by our leader's unwavering spirit.

Soon, we were all standing. United. Hands found shoulders, gripped arms. A silent promise passed between us. We weren't just fighting for ourselves anymore. We were fighting for the helpless, for the memory of the lost, for Rehan, and for the

legacy of his brother. Together, in that broken office, we found our strength again.

We would stand. We would serve. We would not turn back.



A random collection of photos showcases the Golden Team in action, with Aadil Golden distributing raw food parcels.



34. Kitchen in Crisis: Will Golden Kitchen Rise from the Ashes?

Sunset's glory spilled through the Golden Kitchen windows, painting our exhausted faces with amber light as we finally settled around the table. Our tight circle erupted with laughter—precious moments of normalcy as we traded stories from the world before COVID had shattered everything we knew.

Mr. Farooq moved among us with crinkled, kind eyes and a plate of steaming snacks. His calloused hands, testament to years of dedication, placed food before each of us with remarkable attention to our individual preferences. It was immediately clear why Mr. Rehan Golden had chosen him to lead our kitchen team.

“Eat up, boys!” commanded Mr. Farooq, his broad smile carrying warmth and gentle authority. Wiping sweat from his brow, he nodded approvingly as we reached for the food. *“In our days, we ate like lions and worked like bulls—none of this shy business!”* he declared in his thick Bhopali accent, laughter rumbling from deep in his chest. Beneath this playful scolding, his watchful eyes revealed his deepest concern—that no one should ever go hungry on his watch.

Dr. Aamir Pathology seized a piece with theatrical flourish, examining it with exaggerated scrutiny before his face broke into that familiar mischievous grin. *“Let me check it out,”* he announced loudly, holding the snack toward the light. *“It’s*

definitely better than yesterday's. I never knew my pathology skills would help me find the tastiest snacks!"

Laughter erupted, bouncing off walls and momentarily lifting the pandemic's suffocating weight from our shoulders.

Across the table, Sudeep's observant gaze found me untouching my food. Concern furrowed his brow as he slid a plate toward me, leaving faint fingerprints along its edge.

"*Why don't you eat?*" he whispered, eyebrows knitting together with worry.

I sighed deeply, hand instinctively spreading across my abdomen. "*I don't feel well, Sudeep,*" I admitted quietly beneath the surrounding chatter. "*There's pain in my stomach.*" My discomfort must have been plainly visible, as Sudeep's expression immediately softened.

His warm hand squeezed my shoulder firmly. "*Get some rest then,*" he advised, nodding toward the door.

By eight that evening, I reluctantly pushed myself up, legs heavy as lead while waving a weak goodbye. The city streets—normally vibrant with life—lay eerily silent as I made my way home, my solitary footsteps echoing against pavement in a world forced into hiding.

That night, my body revolted. Twisted sheets grew damp with sweat as my stomach clenched violently, barely giving me time to reach the bathroom. Hours blurred into miserable eternity—violent retching that left my throat raw and diarrhea draining what little strength remained.

For four endless days, I remained imprisoned at home, too weak to stand. My thoughts constantly drifted to my friends at the kitchen, their faces appearing in feverish dreams.

The fifth morning, feeling marginally stronger, I pushed open the Golden Kitchen door at 7 AM, expecting the usual symphony—clattering pots, hissing steam, the comforting aroma of fresh toast.

Instead, silence hit me like a physical wall. My heart plummeted at the sight of my friends sitting motionless around the room—shoulders slumped, eyes downcast, hands idle in their laps. Dark shadows beneath their eyes told stories of sleepless nights.

By this hour, our kitchen should have been transformed into organized chaos: ten to twelve gleaming tea thermoses lined up neatly, disposable cups stacked beside bulging polybags of golden-brown toast. Today, counters sat barren, while defeat hung heavy in the air.

I dragged myself across the floor, collapsing into the empty chair beside Sudeep, who didn't even acknowledge my presence. My voice emerged as a croak: *"What's the matter?"* Though deep within, I already knew.

Sudeep's silence spoke volumes as his fingers nervously picked at a loose thread. Around us, eyes briefly connected before darting away, each reflecting the same raw emotions—fear swimming in uncertainty, with only faint sparks of hope fighting for survival.

Aadil's voice finally fractured the silence, breaking with emotion: *"We don't have any raw food in storage, nor do we have any funds for the last two days."* His words fell like stones in the quiet room.

My throat tightened as I turned to Sudeep. *"Does this mean no food has been distributed for the last two days?"* The question tasted bitter on my tongue.

Sudeep merely blinked slowly, eyes glistening with unshed tears, giving me all the answer I needed.

Truth crashed over me with devastating force. We weren't simply a kitchen but a lifeline for countless families during this pandemic—a lifeline now unraveling thread by thread.

As hours crawled by, every phone ring jolted us with momentary hope, heads snapping up expectantly. Could it be Mr. Golden with news of food? Each time, that hope flickered and died, leaving us further deflated.

That evening around ten, we watched Mr. Farooq and Mr. Rehan Golden huddled in urgent conversation across the room. Yellow light cast deep shadows across their faces, highlighting worry lines etched around eyes and mouths. Mr. Golden's hands moved rapidly as he spoke, occasionally pinching the bridge of his nose—his familiar gesture when facing impossible dilemmas.

At half past ten, Tohid, Mr. Farooq's son, silently placed steaming tea before us. The boy's usual energetic bounce had vanished, replaced by careful, measured movements, as if he too carried our collective burden.

We sat motionless—some staring blankly at useless phone screens, others gazing into emptiness. Steam rose and disappeared from untouched cups, growing cold like our dampened spirits.

I watched Javed methodically arrange mattresses, movements mechanical from countless repetitions. Most of us slept at the Golden Kitchen now, unable to bear leaving, still clinging to hope for salvation.

Later that night, when Salman shuffled to the washroom, exhaustion weighing heavily on him, he passed Mr. Golden's office. Through the half-open door, he glimpsed our leader

sitting alone in dim light, head buried in hands, staring at the floor. The sight of this pillar of strength appearing defeated made Salman's heart constrict.

As he attempted to pass unnoticed, Mr. Golden's head snapped up, bloodshot eyes finding Salman's in the darkness.

"*Salman*," he called, voice rough with fatigue yet carrying that unmistakable determination. "*I know the team is upset and losing hope.*" He straightened, physically pushing back against despair. "*Stress and tension are okay, but we should not lose hope. Tell them I will never lose hope, and they won't either. We will find a way.*"

Salman nodded, throat too constricted for words, and continued to the washroom. Returning to our sleeping area, he found Javed propped on one elbow, eyes gleaming in darkness.

"*What did Mr. Golden say?*" Javed whispered, barely audible.

"*We will find a way*," Salman repeated, the simple phrase hanging like a fragile promise.

Around us, bodies shifted as others revealed their wakefulness, pretending sleep only to spare each other additional burden. One by one, we sat up, blankets wrapped against night chill.

Our sleeping area transformed into impromptu council, voices murmuring softly. Sudeep pulled knees to chest, hugging them tightly as he voiced our collective fear: "*Do you think our kitchen will ever return to normal?*"

Some nodded immediately, faces set with stubborn faith. Others looked away, unable to fabricate even false optimism. That night, sleep eluded us, minds too consumed by worry to find rest.

The next day, my still-recovering body and emotional exhaustion kept me asleep until noon. I remember the gradual

ascent to consciousness—first registering unusual sounds, then confusion as my brain struggled to interpret what it heard.

My eyes opened reluctantly, expecting familiar desolation. Instead, I blinked rapidly, convinced I was dreaming. The kitchen pulsed with activity! Mr. Farooq directed operations with energetic gestures while Aadil Irshad, Anas Samad, Arib Samad, Adnan Anwar, Hamza, Zeeshan Anwar, Farhan Anwar, Majid, Abid, and Mujahid bustled about, muscles straining as they carried heavy food sacks into storage. Their faces glistened with sweat but shone with unmistakable joy.

My heart leaped. Tears blurred my vision, which I frantically cleared away, needing to confirm this miracle's reality. With trembling hands, I turned to Sudeep, still peacefully curled in deep sleep beside me.

"Sudeep, wake up! Wake up!" I shook him urgently, voice cracking with emotion.

He groaned, swatting my hand without opening his eyes. *"Have you gone crazy? Let me sleep,"* he mumbled, pulling his blanket overhead.

"No, Sudeep, you don't understand," I insisted, yanking the blanket back. *"The food... the food has arrived!"*

Sudeep cracked one suspicious eye, studying my face for signs of cruel deception. Finding none, he bolted upright, instantly alert.

"Thank you, God!" he shouted, voice thundering through the room. His outburst startled Aamir awake, who knocked into Javed, creating a domino effect that roused Salman, Kabeer, and Fahim in quick succession.

As awareness dawned on each face, expressions transformed from confusion to astonishment to pure, unbridled joy.

Embarrassment at oversleeping vanished as we scrambled upright, eager to join the miracle unfolding.

Dr. Aamir Pathology, hair askew from sleep, adjusted his glasses and surveyed the scene with his characteristic smirk. “*I never believed my pathology skills would help me predict this so correctly,*” he quipped, chest puffing dramatically.

“*Shut up!*” we chorused, but our wide grins and bubbling laughter betrayed our relief and amusement.

Within thirty minutes, everyone who had slept in the Golden Office was working, movements energized by renewed purpose, faces glowing with gratitude. The air vibrated with activity and rekindled hope.

Fahim, eternally curious, paused while lifting a sack, eyes wide with wonder. “*How did this miracle happen?*” he asked, gazing at the abundance that had materialized seemingly from nowhere.

Aadil’s expression turned strangely bittersweet. “*Come, let me show you,*” he said softly, beckoning us to follow.

Puzzled but intrigued, we trailed after him through streets to a spot near the old SBI bank building in Jahangirabad. We stopped at an empty parking space—one immediately significant to all of us. Here, Mr. Rehan Golden had always parked his cherished car before switching to an Activa scooter during strictest lockdown days, when the smaller vehicle could navigate routes inaccessible to cars.

“*Remember where Mr. Rehan Golden used to park his car?*” Aadil asked quietly, eyes fixed on the vacant space.

We nodded, memories flooding back of seeing that car—a constant in our changing world—parked there day after day.

Javed's voice emerged barely above whisper, thick with emotion. *"This is where Mr. Rehan Golden's car used to be."* His hands clenched into white-knuckled fists at his sides.

Aadil swallowed hard before continuing, *"But it's gone now. Forever."* His eyes glistened. *"He sacrificed his car, his prized possession, to keep our kitchen running, to ensure we could continue serving the community."*

The revelation struck us like physical force. We stood frozen, the magnitude of Mr. Golden's sacrifice penetrating deeply. His car wasn't merely transportation—it symbolized his success, yet he had relinquished it without hesitation for others' welfare.

Tears flowed freely down our faces. In silent procession, we returned to the kitchen, footsteps heavy with the weight of what we'd learned.

The senior team had reached a difficult decision—we would distribute food once daily instead of twice, stretching resources as far as possible during these uncertain times. Not ideal, but sufficient to sustain our mission.

As we prepared morning toast and planned evening meals, Mr. Rehan Golden's sacrifice burned brightly in our consciousness. Our hands moved with new determination, hearts beating with renewed purpose. His unwavering spirit had once again become our salvation.

Every meal we made—toast, dal, roti—became a tribute to a man who gave his all for others. His legacy gave us the strength to meet any challenge. That day joined the Golden Kitchen's story of sacrifice, resilience, and hope, as we vowed to keep serving those who needed us most.





35. Six Years of Savings, One Night of Sacrifice

The air in our small office was thick with fear. A cold dread twisted in my stomach as I saw that same fear reflected in the tight set of Mr. Farooq's jaw.

Yesterday, I had given him the terrible news: the food was nearly gone. The same food Mr. Golden had sold his car to buy just sixteen days ago, the food that was meant to last a month.

Our phones were a constant scream of need. Call after call from families—begging, pleading, desperate. The demand for our raw food parcels was a wildfire, devouring our supplies.

The truth hit Mr. Farooq hard. He glanced at Mr. Golden, who was slumped over his desk, a portrait of exhaustion. How could he tell him? He couldn't. Not now.

Suddenly, Aadil burst in, a force of energy. Mr. Farooq quickly pulled him aside.

"The supplies—," he hissed, his voice tight, eyes wide with the fear I knew so well.

The rest of us pressed close, our grim faces showing Aadil just how bad it was.

Just then, Adnan Khan arrived, carrying boxes of masks and sanitizers. He met our gazes, and in his calm eyes, we found a spark of hope. He often brought these vital safety kits when our spirits sank, a silent, generous gift.

Aadil listened as Mr. Farooq explained. His usual smile vanished, replaced by a quiet determination. “We’ll fix this,” he promised, his grip tight on Mr. Farooq’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. We won’t fail Uncle Rehan.”

His words felt like solid ground. I nodded, ready.

Immediately, Aadil, Adnan Khan, Daud, Amir, and I hit the quiet streets with the kits. My legs burned, but I pushed on, searching for heroes: the brave street vendors, the tireless social workers.

Handing a kit to an old woman by her cart, her grateful smile shrank my own fear. Our Golden Team usually paid for these, but Adnan Khan often gave them freely, his eyes always warm.

Later, Aadil gathered his core team in our tiny room—his cousins Adnan Anwar, Anas Samad, Arib Samad, Farhan, and me. The air turned to ice.

Aadil’s voice was low but strong as stone. “Uncle Rehan must not know. We handle this. Ourselves.”

We understood. A heavy promise settled over us. My stomach clenched, but a fierce resolve pushed through it.

“Okay,” I said, meeting his eyes. “What’s the plan?”

Adnan Anwar’s voice cracked with the question we all feared. “But Aadil... the money? Where will it come from?”

The question hung in the crushing silence. In it, I saw my future flash before my eyes. No one moved.

When I closed my eyes, an image cut through, sharp as a knife: a father’s face, skin stretched tight over bone; a small child licking crumbs from a broken plate. A deep ache grew in my chest, and my hands squeezed into shaking fists.

“Soon, soon...” Ten years of sweat, of saving every penny from building refineries to plants—now vanishing like sand in the wind. My school... my dream... The blackboards I saw when I closed my eyes, the tiny desks I designed in my head—would they disappear forever, like fog in the morning?

“Every day. Every time. It feels like holding the sand of my dreams, slipping away. No matter how tight I squeeze, it keeps slipping.”

“I’ll help,” I heard myself say, the words like poison on my tongue. The moment they left my lips, my heart shattered.

Then—soft, warm—a voice brushed my ear. “The greatest duty... is to serve humanity.”

My breath caught. The words felt so real, a gentle breath on my skin. My eyes shot open to the photo of my father on the wall. His kind smile, his gentle eyes. I remembered him holding my small hands, telling me, “My son, the only way we truly rise is by lifting others up.”

Tears burned my eyes. In the dusty light, his face seemed to glow. This was his legacy. Not land, not money. This choice. This pain that was becoming my purpose.

“My savings... the money for the school,” I said again, my voice stronger now. “It can wait.”

I knew it might mean starting from nothing, but I also understood my father’s final lesson: saving a life is greater than any building.

Aadil broke the quiet, his voice steady but for a slight tremor. “I have savings,” he said softly, taking a deep breath. “The money for the land... for my cafe. I’m tired of renting. But... I can use that.”

My jaw dropped.

“Six years, Aadil!” Adnan Anwar cried, his voice raw. “You saved for six years for that land!”

“I know,” Aadil said, a small, bittersweet smile on his face. “But this... this is more important right now.”

A fire ignited. Anas Samad’s voice trembled. “I... I have money. Saved for a new laptop. I’ll give that.”

One by one, some with tears, all with resolute smiles, we added our postponed dreams to the pile.

“Everything I have...,” I said, maybe too loudly, gesturing toward my own plans at home. “It’s all there. These people cannot wait.”

We scraped together just enough for another month’s food. For now, it was enough.

That night, blankets turned the Golden office floor into our bedroom. Fahim, Salman, Kabeer, Javed, Sudeep, Mayank, and I were the overnight team. Bone-tired, I took the first watch.

It was nearly 12:30 a.m. Only Mr. Golden remained, his voice a low, grave murmur as he spoke with Mr. Farooq.

Javed caught my eye, whispering, “Hope everything’s okay.”

I nodded, a swell of pride in my chest that they didn’t know how close we’d come to disaster. We set our alarms for 3:00 a.m. and sank into a desperate sleep.

Clank!

The sharp, metallic sound ripped us from our sleep. Groaning, we stretched. Sudeep had gone to light the stove for our morning tea. We heard the frantic click-click-click of the lighter, followed by a heavy silence.

He stumbled back into the room, his face pale.

“It’s empty,” he whispered, his voice tight with panic, eyes wide. “The gas cylinder... it’s empty!”

No spares. A cold shock jolted us awake. No tea meant no complete breakfast, a devastating blow to morale.

Before panic could set in, I started, “Okay, does anyone have—”

But Javed spun on Sudeep, his voice frayed with four sleepless days. “You knew it was low! You are responsible for this! Why didn’t you tell us yesterday? Why leave it until now?”

Sudeep flinched, guilt washing over him. “I... I thought it would last,” he stammered, his shoulders slumping in defeat. “I honestly thought there was one more morning in it.”

My heart ached for him; it was an easy mistake when you were running on fumes. I put a hand on Javed’s arm. “Hey, we’re all worn out. It’s no one’s fault.”

Just then, Mr. Farooq arrived with Majid, another volunteer, and stopped, taking in the scene. He stepped calmly between the two.

“Enough,” his firm, kind voice cut through the tension. “Blame won’t fill the cylinder. Anger won’t boil water. We are a team, and we are tired. Let’s find a solution. Together.”

His calm authority diffused the charge. Regret replaced Javed’s anger. He looked at Sudeep, whose defensiveness melted away into shame.

“I can bring a cylinder from my home,” Mr. Farooq offered. “We’ll order new ones when the shops open.”

It was a delay, but it was a plan. Javed looked at Sudeep, the exhaustion clear on both their faces, and they shared a quick, tight hug of understanding. Mr. Farooq’s leadership had pulled us back from the edge.

Later that afternoon, around 2:00 p.m., hope arrived in dusty boxes. Aadil and the others walked in, arms laden with new food, their faces bright with weary triumph.

A collective sigh of relief swept through the office. As I grabbed a heavy box of rice, the strain in my arms was a welcome ache. My dream could wait; this shared victory was worth more.

But as we stacked the supplies, we all knew. This was breathing room, not a cure. The desperate need outside continued to grow. These supplies, too, would run out.

The questions—How long? When will it end?—hung in the air, unanswered.

Yet we stood together. Battered and bone-weary, but bound by sleepless nights and brave sacrifices. That bond kept us steady.

Fear still whispered, but our shared spirit, the one that made us pause our own dreams, made us ready.

Looking at the determined faces around me, I knew that whatever came next, we would face it. Together.





36. Life Is Beautiful: Seven Days of Sweat, Forever Memories

Day seven. The finish line of our marathon shift in Golden's kitchen. For a full week, we'd been bound to it, breathing its air from 3 a.m. until midnight struck. Exhaustion wasn't just knocking; it lived deep in our bones, a heavy chill. Dark, bruised shadows bloomed under our red eyes. We ran on fumes, surviving on maybe two hours of snatched sleep. Sometimes, luck granted us an afternoon nap—our bodies dropping onto any flat surface like heavy sacks.

Yet, somehow, laughter still surfaced. Shoulders bumped warmly as we worked side by side. A strange comfort grew in sharing the struggle, an odd energy keeping us upright. We were still standing. After this beautiful chaos, our "normal" 6 a.m.-to-midnight shift would feel easy.

"Six to midnight?" I joked, wiping sweat from my temple.
"Sounds like a vacation!"

That evening, as tiredness threatened to pull us under, Javed burst in. Our hopeful teammate, his weary face suddenly shone like a child's on their birthday. After ten long days of searching, he'd found them: his favorite cigarettes. He waved the packet like a flag, buzzing with triumph.

"Three times the price!" he grinned, clutching the small pack like treasure. His fingers trembled with joy and exhaustion.

"Worth it, though?" I teased, nudging him.

"Every single damn penny!" Javed laughed, head thrown back, the sound full of pure relief that warmed us all. Despite our heavy eyelids, his happiness spread, cracking tired faces into genuine smiles.

"Let me see the sacred sticks," Mayank joined in, bowing dramatically. *"Behold! The treasure of Covid times!"*

We brewed tea, joined the evening distribution, then flowed into prepping lunch for the next day. Tasks melted into tasks. Our hands moved automatically, knowing the rhythm. But even on autopilot, there was always space for a joke, a spark in the long hours.

"Hey," Sudeep mumbled, chopping with half-closed eyes, *"my knife feels sharper than my brain."*

"Your knife was always sharper, my friend," Fahim shot back instantly, winking as he dodged a playfully flicked piece of carrot.

Past 10 p.m. The regular team trickled out. Mr. Golden had dashed off earlier with Mr. Farooq. The image is sharp: we full-timers slumped in chairs around the hall. Legs stretched, bodies heavy, but mouths still running, filling the quiet with talk.

Suddenly, Sudeep sat bolt upright, eyes wide. *"Guys,"* he began, gesturing wildly, *"imagine when we're old? Telling grandkids about Covid? About these days?"* He paused, scanning our faces. *"What will they even think?"*

Javed scratched his chin, voice soft. *"Maybe... they won't believe it. How could they understand?"* He looked at his worn hands, shoulders slumping briefly under the weight of it all.

Fahim stretched, joints popping. *"But doesn't it feel good? Like passing a hard exam? Seven days straight... sweet relief, right?"*

"I just wish this was the last exam," I sighed, rubbing my stiff neck. *"Who knows what's next?"*

Salman, quiet until now, suddenly lit up. He slapped his thigh, jumping up, shaking off the weariness. *"Forget stress! We finished! Day off tomorrow! Why aren't we celebrating?"* A grin spread. *"Let's play Antakshari!"*

A sudden energy surged through us. Fahim, Salman, Kabeer, Javed, Sudeep, Mayank, and I formed a loose circle—some on the floor, some on chairs—all leaning in.

Javed went first. Hand on heart, he sang clearly, melodically: *"Dil Chahta Hai, Hum Na Rahein Kabhi Yaaron Ke Bin..."* (My heart wants that we never live without friends...).

Whoops and claps followed. We swayed to the simple beauty. My turn. Pretending to hold a mic, I sang dramatically: *"Na tum jano na hum... Kyon aati hai bahaar..."* (Neither you know, nor I... Why does spring arrive...). For a moment, I wasn't just a tired volunteer; I was a performer, pouring out a sliver of hidden hopes with the melody. I closed my eyes and saw my dream school in front of me—tall, vast; students milling about, children contemplating mastery and belief—and I opened them to finish with a bow to whistles and cheers.

Salman leaped up, grabbing a ladle-mic. His voice soared: *"Roobaro Aye Saala... Abhi Abhi Huaa Yaqeen..."* (Face to face, oh friend... Just now, I came to believe...).

Then Sudeep. Hand on heart, eyes closed, he sang his favorite, known to us all: *"Yaaro dosti badi hi haseen hai..."* (Friends, friendship is so very beautiful...).

Magic sparked. One by one, we joined in. Voices rough, maybe off-key, but full of heart. Javed pulled Sudeep up, and they danced—a clumsy, happy sway, arms around shoulders.

Seconds later, we were all up. Spinning, laughing, bumping, singing at the tops of our lungs. In that moment, Covid's weight, aching muscles, exhaustion—all vanished. Only music, movement, and pure, uncomplicated joy remained.

Suddenly, another voice joined from behind, familiar and warm: “*Yaaro dosti badi hi haseen hai.*” We froze mid-laugh and turned. Leaning in the doorway, a gentle smile on his lips, was Mr. Farooq. He kept singing, eyes twinkling. We were stunned, maybe a bit embarrassed.

But he nodded, urging us on. I broke the spell, grabbing hands. The circle reformed, voices rising louder. Aamir Pathology and Aadil slid quietly in, shoulders touching ours, adding their voices.

As the song soared to its end, slow, steady clapping started. We turned again. Mr. Golden stood there. His usually focused face was softened by a humble, genuine smile—an image burned into my memory. He didn't speak, just nodded in appreciation. But his eyes said it all: *Even in this darkness, you found light.*

Much later, we collapsed onto mattresses, too tired to move. Sleep wouldn't come immediately. The air felt thick with relief, yet tinged with sweet sadness. Our bodies were still, minds buzzing.

Sudeep, our philosopher, whispered at the ceiling, “*We wanted this shift over so badly. But now... I think I'm going to miss it.*”

I nodded, the same confusing knot in my chest. “*Yeah,*” I murmured. “*Something about it... I won't forget.*” I gently flicked a mosquito off his forehead.

Mayank, the optimist, rolled to face us. “*The peace, the craziness, the adventure,*” he smiled. “*I'll miss it all.*” He grimaced playfully. “*Especially those glorious 3 a.m. alarms.*” Soft chuckles rippled through the room.

“Oh god, the alarms!” Javed groaned, pillow over his face.
“That sound will haunt me!”

Those alarms. Sudeep, always first up. For ten minutes, he’d just sit, statue-like, head in hands, hair wild. *“Arey uthjao... 3 baj rahe hain...”* he’d mumble, lips barely moving—less a wake-up call, more a sleepy lullaby.

We roared as Fahim perfectly imitated Sudeep’s zombie morning face.

“Remember day three?” I laughed. *“Mr. Farooq catching Sudeep’s routine?”*

“Oh my god, yes!” Kabeer clutched his stomach, tears in his eyes. *“Mr. Farooq looked and said—”*

“—Are you waking them or singing them back to sleep? Your voice could soothe babies!” we finished together, mimicking Mr. Farooq’s deep voice. Fresh laughter washed over us.

Salman sat up again. *“And the morning races? Who got ready fastest?”* He puffed his chest. *“My record! Four minutes flat!”*

“Only because you skipped washing your face!” Mayank accused, tossing a sock. Salman caught it and lobbed it back.

These silly races, shared tiredness, inside jokes—threads weaving us tight. Surviving together, finding joy in the grind, building bonds like family.

“And the late-night horror stories!” Javed exclaimed, eyes wide. *“Miss those already!”*

Mr. Farooq, sometimes Majid, would join us near 1 a.m. In the eerie lockdown quiet, they’d spin ghost stories. Even silly tales felt chilling then.

“Remember huddling?” Mayank chuckled, mock-scared. *“Hanging on every word?”*

"Pretending not to be scared," I added, "but jumping at every creak!" I jerked suddenly, making them jump, then laugh.

"Ugh, trying to sleep after," Fahim groaned. "Wondering if every sound was... 'not normal'."

"Speak for yourself!" Kabeer protested, face a bit pale. "I wasn't scared!"

"Really?" Javed raised an eyebrow. "Why'd you need to sleep squished between us after the hospital story?"

Kabeer flushed, throwing his pillow. "It was cold! Needed body heat!"

Sudeep sighed dramatically. "Absolutely! The stories turned Kabeer into a human ice cube! Needed emergency defrosting! Get the man a microwave!"

We dissolved into helpless laughter again, Kabeer groaning under his blanket.

As laughter softened, my eyes found the wall. Beside the clock, a simple frame: *"Life is beautiful."* The words caught in my throat. Lying there, surrounded by these friends, sharing these small, bright memories, it felt profoundly true. This hard, strange, exhausting time... it was beautiful, somehow.

Next morning, after our final tea distribution, we went home. One precious day off. We weren't paid, but that wasn't why we did it. It felt important. People counted on us. And deep down, beneath the aches and grumbles, we'd grown to love this place—and each other.

I fell onto my bed fully dressed, sinking into a sleep like deep water. Woke around 1 p.m., mouth dry, body heavy. Missed calls from Javed and Sudeep. A lurch in my stomach—something wrong? I called them back on conference.

"*We miss it,*" Javed said instantly, voice warm but surprised at his own words.

"*Yeah,*" Sudeep echoed softly. A sigh. "*It's weird... but I actually do. My house feels too quiet.*"

"*Nobody snoring or stealing blankets,*" I added, smiling at my ceiling. My comfortable room felt strangely empty.

Golden's kitchen. More than a workplace. A crucible where tiredness became laughter, struggle became joy, hardship forged unforgettable memories. It had shaken us awake, made us feel intensely, vividly alive.

Lying in my quiet bed that night, my clock ticking too loudly, I knew those seven days changed me. We'd pushed past limits, found hidden strengths. Laughed till we cried, found beauty in tea, a song, a joke. Built friendships to last forever.

In the silence, I smiled. My heart felt full, grateful. For purposeful work, for friends become family, and for the simple, shining truth that sometimes, even when everything feels broken, life really is beautiful. And in that beauty, I found a renewed strength, a quiet promise to myself that my own dreams—though paused—were not forgotten, but now intertwined with these incredible souls.





37. New Year's Silent Scream: An IAS Officer's Love and Loss

January 1st, 2021. No fireworks lit the Bhopal sky. No laughter echoed. A heavy silence pressed down on the locked-down city, trapping families inside their homes. Streets lay empty. Then, police sirens screamed through the cold morning air—not celebrating the New Year, but racing against time.

The National Hospital buzzed with whispers. Senior officials huddled in tight groups, their faces tense. Doctors and nurses sprinted through corridors, their footsteps pounding like a frantic heartbeat. Inside the ICU, machines beeped urgently. Outside, a woman sat crumpled in a chair, tears carving paths down her cheeks. Her mind drifted to a memory: a young man kneeling in the rain, holding a ring. *“Will you marry me?”* They’d built a life as partners, best friends, anchors. *“We’re more than husband and wife,”* he’d say, his stern eyes melting into a smile. *“We’re warriors.”*

Months earlier, she’d watched him stir his tea, his hands trembling. *“Your tea’s getting cold,”* he’d joked, but his face betrayed him—deep lines of exhaustion, skin pale as ash. *“I miss your smile,”* she whispered. *“You’re working yourself to death.”*

“This pandemic shows no mercy, Anju,” he replied, voice thin but steady. *“How can I rest? Every day, people die. My conscience won’t let me stop.”*

Then came the morning on their lawn. “*Pass the newspaper?*” she’d asked. He tried to stand, but his legs buckled. She screamed. Their driver rushed him to Hamidia Hospital. He was Masood Akhtar, a respected IAS officer. She, Anju Dubey, his wife and fellow civil servant.

After five days, he returned home—only to collapse again. On December 12th, he was rushed to National Hospital. COVID rules barred Anju from his bedside. For weeks, her only lifeline was a nurse who texted photos at dawn. Each night, Anju stared at the ceiling, praying for sunrise. Each morning, she clutched her phone, tracing his face on the screen.

January 1st. The call came at dawn: “*Critical condition.*” She ran. Outside the ICU, officials crowded the hall. Doctors rushed in and out, their eyes avoiding hers. Hours blurred. Finally, a doctor stopped before her. “*I’m sorry. We couldn’t save him.*”

The world shattered. Her best friend, her warrior—gone. The New Year began with a silence louder than any storm.



Strangers Become Angels: An IAS Officer's Final Journey

Morning light spilled over Masood’s body, wrapped in sterile plastic. Whispers cut the air: “*Straight to the grave.*” Anju’s fists clenched. *No.* Her husband deserved honor, not haste.

At the graveyard, a man moved calmly among mourners—Mr. Rehan Golden, the committee chairman. Anju waited, trembling. But as she approached, his phone rang. She followed him outside.

Two autos stood loaded with food parcels. Rehan counted them, calling out: “*Rice, lentils, vegetables—for the hungry.*” Anju froze. Here was a man risking his life to feed strangers, to bury the dead with dignity.

When she finally spoke, her voice cracked. “*Please... treat him with respect.*”

Rehan’s eyes softened. “*We honor every soul here.*”

He kept his word. Workers carried Masood’s body gently, reciting prayers. Anju watched, tears mixing with relief. In that moment, she felt it—warmth piercing her grief. A stranger had shown her husband the kindness the world owed him.

As she left, Anju carried two weights: the crushing void of loss, and a fragile hope. Even in darkness, humanity flickered.



High Bills, Broken Hearts: Pandemic Healthcare's Cruel Cost

Weeks later, a hospital bill arrived: ₹29 lakhs for 18 days of treatment. Anju stared at the numbers, gutted. A doctor (who asked to stay anonymous) confirmed the truth: “*Hospitals charged ten times the real cost. They preyed on fear.*”

Greed had stalked the pandemic’s shadows. For Anju, it was a final betrayal—a system that billed compassion at criminal rates. But she remembered Rehan’s quiet grace, the food parcels, the prayers. In the clash between cruelty and kindness, she knew which force would linger in her heart.

Masood’s legacy wasn’t the bill, or the plastic shroud. It was the lesson he’d lived: “*We’re warriors.*” And warriors fight—for justice, for dignity, for the light in the dark.



Above Masood's grave, a silent tribute—sleep in peace, dear Masood, in your final resting place.





38. The Unbreakable Leader

Breaks: Rehan Golden Hospitalized

July 14, 2020. The news came crashing down on Rehan Golden around noon. Four bodies. Four souls needing a final resting place before the sun even hit its highest point. Four more claimed by the sickness choking the city, the world. The weight felt physical, pressing the air from his lungs. But Rehan stood firm, his face a careful blank, eyes holding a quiet, steady fire that refused to be extinguished.

He walked slowly through the graveyard dirt with Amir, his team leader. The air hung thick and still. They scanned a small, empty patch of earth, baked hard by the sun. Rehan pointed. His hand, usually so steady, trembled just a little—a crack showing the storm inside. “*Here,*” his voice was soft but solid, final. “*This spot will hold them.*”

Amir saw it then. Really saw it. The lines carved deep around Rehan’s eyes, deeper than just weeks ago. The shadows beneath them spoke of endless, sleepless nights, of grief becoming part of him. “*Are you alright, sir?*” Amir asked, his own worry plain.

Rehan forced a smile. It didn’t reach his eyes. “*Very good,*” he nodded, but each step seemed heavier than the last, dragged down by burdens no one else could see.

Back in the cramped graveyard office, Rehan faced his team. His command was quiet but absolute. *“Dig four graves. Quickly. They arrive in six hours.”*

Just like that. A grim order for a grim day. But the Golden Team knew hardship. They were built for it. Without a word, they moved. Then, one worker spoke up, hesitant. *“Sir, the shovels... they are old, worn out.”*

A flicker of resolve sparked in Rehan’s exhausted eyes. *“I will handle it,”* he promised, his voice leaving no room for doubt.

Rehan and Amir set off. Finding tools was hard; the city was locked down tight. Phone calls led them down empty streets to a small shop near the Kabarkhana area. The owner, Nouman, looked up. Recognition dawned. *“You... you are Rehan Golden?”* he asked, voice warm with respect. *“The man who feeds the poor? The head of the graveyard committee?”*

Rehan gave a simple nod. Before he could ask, Amir jumped in. *“Our shovels are rusted, sir. It’s hard work digging these days.”*

Nouman shook his head when Rehan reached for money. *“No,”* he said firmly, pressing new shovels into their hands. *“You are doing God’s work. Take them.”* Rehan tried again to pay, but Nouman’s gentle eyes held steady—a moment of shared humanity, a small light against the crushing darkness.

On the ride back, the scooter sputtered under the added weight. Amir first thought it was the tools. Then he glanced at Rehan. Bone-deep weariness. Slumped shoulders. Vacant eyes. At the graveyard gate, Rehan didn’t dismount. He sat, staring ahead, seeing nothing.

“You go,” he murmured, voice distant. *“I’ll be there in a moment.”*

Fifteen minutes passed. Then twenty. The team dug on, sweat stinging under the brutal sun. The phone rang again. Another body. Then another. The count rose to six.

Rehan stood frozen near the gate, the news landing like blows. Six souls. Moments later, another call—Aadil, his nephew. A seventh soul, a woman, would arrive by evening. Seven.

The sun beat down without mercy. Every line on Rehan's face deepened, etching worry and sleepless nights. Yet he gathered himself. He walked calmly to Amir, pointing to new grave sites. His voice, though quiet, anchored the chaos even as his world tilted.

Amir and the team dug into the hard earth, heat suffocating. Rehan watched, gaze heavy with concern.

A sharp cry cut the air. A choked scream of terror.

One worker pointed, face white with horror.

Rehan.

He lay crumpled, still. Unconscious. Skin unnaturally hot. Tools dropped. Shovels clattered. Silence fell, thick and terrifying.

“Rehan sir!” The shout tore through throats. Panic exploded. They lifted his limp body, racing toward Charak Hospital. A desperate human chain.

Empty lockdown streets held their breath. The world paused.

Police officers, vendors, volunteers froze. They saw the procession—Rehan Golden, their symbol of hope, carried past.

Vegetable carts abandoned. Officers ran alongside. A wave of fear, loyalty, desperate hope crashed through the city. Whispers became cries:

“Is that... Rehan Golden?” “What happened to him?!” “Oh God, no...”

At Charak Hospital, Dr. Anil Bhargav rushed out. “Kya hua, Rehan bhai ko? What happened to Rehan Golden?” he stammered, face ghost-white.

Inside, nurses froze. Rehan wasn’t just another patient. He was the man who fed thousands. Ensured dignity in death. Served through darkest hours.

As they carried him into the ER, news spread like wildfire. Aadil’s phone exploded—calls from volunteers, citizens, those Rehan had helped. The hospital entrance filled with anxious faces, a sea of prayer and concern.

In the stark ER, Rehan lay still. His team surrounded the bed, helpless. Aadil fought tears. The unbreakable leader now broken.

Rehan’s eyelids fluttered. The room fell silent. His weak gaze found Aadil.

Even now, his first words weren’t for himself. “Did... did we prepare lunch?” he whispered, voice a thread.

Aadil forced a shaky smile. “Uncle... it’s 9 p.m. Lunch was served hours ago.”

Rehan nodded faintly, relief flickering. His eyes shifted to Amir. “The graves...?” he breathed. “Were they... dug?”

“Yes, sir. All seven. They are resting peacefully.”

Calm washed over Rehan. His eyes closed, exhaustion pulling him under.

Dr. Bhargav returned, grave. “Rehan is critically exhausted. Blood pressure dangerously high. Sugar levels erratic. He hasn’t slept, barely eaten. His body has given out.”

Aadil's voice trembled. "How long...?"

"Hard to say. If he doesn't rest, heal... I fear for his recovery. He needs to fight, but first, rest."

Outside, the crowd grew—a silent vigil. The man who carried burdens now needed carrying.

Night deepened. Soft rain tapped the windows like quiet tears. Aadil stayed glued to Rehan's bedside. "Uncle," he whispered, tears falling. "We'll carry the mission. We promise. But now... we need to carry you."

The team stood close, faces etched with fear and determination. Rehan was their fire—his courage, compassion, spirit.

Outside, in rain-streaked darkness, the crowd stood vigilant, whispering prayers. Guided by Rehan's example, they would face the uncertain path. Together.

In the quiet room, Rehan rested fitfully. His team stood watch, hearts filled with fragile hope. They would not let him fall. Not now. Not ever.



Hope Died in Five Days... Then Our Leader Rose from the Grave

By July 19th, five agonizing days had passed. Five days of fear. Five days of exhaustion. Five days of silent, desperate prayers. Each hour stretched like an eternity, weighing us down until our bodies ached and our spirits withered. We had pushed ourselves beyond human limits—not just out of duty, but out of a raw, clawing fear that gnawed at our hearts. The terrible thought that *he*, our leader, our light, might not survive the next

few hours, that he might slip away forever, was a nightmare we couldn't escape.

Our kitchen, once alive with warmth—the clatter of pots, the hum of voices, the smell of food and shared laughter—now stood cold and silent. The joy had drained away, leaving behind a hollow quiet that swallowed every whisper of hope. We moved through it like ghosts, our hands working by memory, our eyes empty. Faces that once shone with purpose were now pale, etched with exhaustion and unspoken grief. The air itself felt heavy, thick with the dread we couldn't name—because saying it aloud would make it real.

Even Mr. Farooq, the man whose laughter could chase away any shadow, had fallen silent. His hands trembled as he passed out thermos flasks, his eyes downcast. The absence of his smile was louder than any words—proof of the crushing weight pressing down on us all.

It felt like the soul of our mission was fading. The fire that had driven us dimmed, leaving a dull, aching emptiness. No one spoke of it, but we all felt it. The silence was easier than facing the truth: Rehan, our strength, our compass, the man who held us together, was slipping away.

Around five that evening, TI Virendra Singh stepped into the kitchen. His face, usually steady, was lined with worry. “*Do you need anything? Any help at all?*” he asked softly, voice heavy with concern. For days, he'd been a quiet pillar of strength, moving between the kitchen and graveyard, trying to hold things together. But even his presence couldn't cut through the fog of fear. What could we say? The only thing we needed lay in a hospital bed, fighting for his life.

The next morning, at the graveyard, Amir stood firm. For five days, he hadn't left. He slept—when sleep came—on the cold office floor. His body screamed for rest, his heart ached with

sorrow, but he refused to step away. Not when so many depended on him.

At eleven, his phone rang—another death. A 14-year-old boy. The body would arrive by six. It was the fifth call that day. Each one struck like a hammer to his chest, but Amir swallowed the pain. He had to keep going.

Meanwhile, in the hospital, Dr. Anil Bhargav stood over Rehan's bed, voice gentle but firm. "*Rehan, you need rest. Just a little time for yourself.*"

But Rehan's mind raced—the graveyard, the kitchen, his people. On the second day, Dr. Bhargav had taken his phone, hoping to force him to rest. But Rehan's heart was still with us.

"*Please, Bhai,*" the doctor urged again. "*You need this.*"

After a long silence, Rehan asked for his phone back. With a sigh, Dr. Bhargav relented. "*Just once a day. Promise me.*" Rehan nodded, but his thoughts were already far away—with us.

The moment the doctor left, Rehan dialed Amir's number. When Amir saw the caller ID, his breath caught—a lifeline in the storm. "*Rehan Sir!*" His voice shook with relief.

"*How are you? How is everything?*" Rehan asked, voice soft but urgent.

"*We're managing, Sir. Everything's under control,*" Amir lied, forcing strength into his words.

"*How many... today?*"

Amir hesitated. "*I... I'm not sure yet.*"

Rehan went quiet, sensing the truth. "*Okay.*" The call ended.

Next, he called Aadil. "*How's the kitchen?*"

"Running, Uncle. Meals, tea, toast—we're keeping up," Aadil answered, exhaustion thick in his voice.

"Thank God," Rehan breathed, a flicker of relief before the weight returned.

Then—another call. An unknown number. *"Shav Yatra Ambulance service,"* the voice said. *"Amir's line was busy. Two more bodies tonight, between eight and ten."*

The words hit Rehan like a punch. *Two more?* Why hadn't Amir told him?

He understood. They were protecting him. Amir. Aadil. All of them. Carrying the weight so he wouldn't have to.

Tears burned down his face. Helplessness twisted inside him—a leader trapped in a broken body while his people suffered.

Then—a spark. A fire in his chest. *"I have to be with them."*

His hands shook as he ripped out the IV, tore off the heart monitor, pulled the oxygen sensor free. A nurse rushed in, horrified. *"Sir! You can't leave!"* Rehan turned, eyes blazing. *"My people need me."* His words carried a finality that left no room for argument.

Within half an hour, he was back.

He walked into the graveyard, air thick with grief. Seven bodies had arrived. Elder brother Anwar Ahmed stared at him, worry carved deep into his face.

"Rehan Uncle, are you okay?" Aadil rushed to him, voice trembling.

"I'm okay." Rehan forced a smile. A lie. His body was breaking. But his soul? Unshakable.

He threw himself into the work—lifting, organizing, guiding. Through the night, he pushed, every breath a battle, every movement defiance against his own weakness.

But the situation was dire. Four more kitchen workers had fallen ill. Two more from the graveyard team. Thirteen of us were down. The rest fought on, digging for strength we didn't have.

Every time someone begged, *“Rehan Bhai, please, rest,”* he just shook his head.

“I want to,” he whispered, voice raw. *“But I hear my brother Irshad’s words—‘The greatest worship is to serve humanity.’”*

And so, even as his body failed him, Rehan kept going. Not for glory. Not for praise. But because his people needed him. And he would never let them fall.



One powerful photo captures Mr. Golden in the hospital—weak, yet unshaken. As doctors urged him to rest, he lifted a finger upward and declared, ‘God will take care of me; my duty is to take care of my people’



39. High Court Judge in Tears to Praise Rehan Golden's Team

On July 17, 2020, Rafeeq stepped into the quiet garden of his oldest friend, Faheem Anwar. Though decades had passed since their days running barefoot through the streets of Sehore, their bond remained unshaken. Faheem, now a High Court judge, and Rafeeq, a humble laborer, had walked vastly different paths—yet when they met, they were still just two boys bound by shared memories.

The evening sun warmed the garden, but peace felt far away. Faheem sat rigidly on the porch, his gaze locked on the horizon. His knuckles were white, his jaw clenched like a man bracing for a storm. Rafeeq's chest tightened—he hadn't seen his friend this broken since they were children.

"Faheem?" Rafeeq whispered, sitting beside him. *"Talk to me."*

For a moment, Faheem didn't move. Then, as if waking from a nightmare, he turned and pulled Rafeeq into a crushing embrace. His body shook. *"Shaheed... my brother..."* he choked out, tears soaking Rafeeq's shoulder. *"They took him to Chirayu Hospital. COVID... it's in his lungs."*

The words sliced through Rafeeq. Shaheed wasn't just family—he was Faheem's hero. As boys, when Faheem's shoes wore thin, Shaheed carried him to school on his back. When fees went unpaid, Shaheed sold his only watch to buy Faheem's

books. Every sacrifice, every sleepless night—it was Shaheed who had turned Faheem’s dreams into reality.

Rafeeq gripped his friend’s trembling hands. *“The doctors said it’s only a 5% infection. He’ll fight this. You’ll see.”*

But the next morning, Rafeeq arrived to find Faheem’s voice cracking like thunder in the quiet house. *“Five percent? Now you say ten?”* He paced, phone pressed to his ear, his face as pale as ash. *“We trusted you!”* When the call ended, he collapsed onto the sofa. *“They don’t know... Rafeeq, they don’t know what’s happening.”*

Rafeeq said nothing. He simply sat closer, their shoulders touching—a silent reminder: *You’re not alone.*

Days crawled by. Then, **on July 24**, the call came. Faheem’s scream tore through the air. *“No... NO!”*

At the hospital, a nurse spoke coldly. *“Body wrapped in plastic. No funeral. Take these papers.”*

Faheem staggered back as if struck. Rafeeq lunged forward, catching him. For a heartbeat, Faheem’s face crumpled—then hardened with resolve. *“No,”* he said, his voice trembling but firm. *“My brother carried dignity his whole life. He won’t lose it in death.”*

Rafeeq stepped forward. *“Rehan Golden—chairman of Jhada Graveyard. He’ll help. I swear it.”*

Faheem’s eyes narrowed. *“Rehan? But... wasn’t he just hospitalized?”*

“He was. And he’s still here.”

At 7 PM, Faheem stood frozen outside Jhada Graveyard. A van arrived, its doors opening to reveal a man leaning heavily on a cane—Rehan Golden. His face was gaunt, sweat glistening on his brow, but his eyes burned with a steadfast, unwavering quiet

fire. It was the look of a man who had faced his own mortality and returned with a deeper purpose.

Without a word, Rehan's team moved. Gloved hands gently washed Shaheed's body with rose water, whispering prayers. Faheem watched, tears blurring the scene. These strangers treated his brother like family—adjusting his shroud, brushing dust from his hair, their every touch a hymn of respect. A profound sense of gratitude began to well up within Faheem, overriding some of the despair.

By 9 PM, it was done. Shaheed rested beneath a neem tree, the earth patted smooth over him. Faheem fell to his knees, sobbing. Not just for loss, but for the raw, aching love he'd witnessed—men and Rehan's team risking their lives to honor a man they'd never met. He felt an immense appreciation for their selfless courage.

Rehan knelt beside him, his cane sinking into the soil. *"Your brother's journey mattered,"* he said softly. *"So does yours."*

Faheem looked up, his throat tight. *"Why... why would you do this?"* he asked, his voice thick with emotion and deep thankfulness.

Rehan smiled faintly, a smile that radiated a gentle strength. *"Because dignity isn't a privilege. It's a right—for the living, and the dead."*

That night, Faheem walked home with Rafeeq, the stars sharp above them. Grief still clawed at his chest, but now, nestled beside it, lived something new: a quiet, unshakable belief. In the worst darkness, he'd seen humanity's light—not in grand speeches or laws, but in the sweat-soaked shirts of everyday heroes. The image of Rehan, frail yet resolute, was etched in his mind.

Shaheed had taught him to survive. Rehan had taught him to hope.

And Rafeeq? He'd taught him that even in the storm, no one truly walks alone.





40. A Race Against Time: The Fight to Save Rehan

S*ix Days. Or Maybe It Was a Lifetime.* Time had lost all meaning. The hours bled into one another, dissolving into a relentless, gnawing exhaustion that clung to Rehan like a second skin. He was running on nothing but sheer willpower now, his body pushed far beyond its limits, far beyond what any man should endure. Food had become an afterthought—meals forgotten, skipped, abandoned. Medicine? A luxury he couldn't afford, not when there were others who needed it more.

We watched him. We saw it—the slow, terrifying erosion of the man we knew. His face, once so full of life and determination, had turned ashen, the color drained from his skin like wax melting under a merciless flame. Dark, hollow crescents carved themselves beneath his eyes, bruises of exhaustion that no amount of rest could erase. His hands—those strong, steady hands that had lifted so many—now trembled uncontrollably, a constant, shuddering betrayal of his failing strength.

And yet, he kept going.

He worked. He pushed. He gave.

While his own body screamed for rest, he poured himself out, drop by drop, until there was almost nothing left.

Because that was Rehan.

He would burn himself to ashes if it meant keeping someone else warm.

July 26th.

The date was seared into our memories, branded onto our souls. The day the world cracked open beneath our feet.

He was in the kitchen office, the air thick and stifling, the dim bulb overhead casting long, weary shadows. Sweat beaded on his forehead, glistening under the dull light as he bent down, muscles straining, his face contorted in a silent battle against his own failing body. A heavy sack of wheat lay before him—just one more burden, one more thing to carry.

"Just... one... more..."

His voice was barely a whisper, raw and frayed, the words dragged from the depths of his stubborn will.

And then—

It happened.

Not slow. Not gradual.

Instant.

His eyes flew wide—no longer strained, no longer determined. Just blank. Shock. Horror.

His body locked, rigid, every muscle seizing at once. The sack slipped from his grip, hitting the floor with a **thud** that echoed like a gunshot in the silent room. His mouth opened—no sound came.

Then—

A scream.

A raw, piercing, **unbearable** scream tore from his throat, shattering the stillness, bouncing off the walls, freezing the blood in our veins.

"REHAN UNCLE!"

Aadil's voice was a strangled cry, his body lurching forward before his mind could even process what was happening. He crashed to his knees beside Rehan, hands hovering, trembling, too terrified to touch, too terrified not to. **"Rehan Uncle! Open your eyes! Please! OPEN YOUR EYES!"**

Mr. Farooq was there in an instant, pressing his ear to Rehan's chest, his own breath held, his face a mask of dawning horror.

Seconds stretched.

Silence.

No breath. No heartbeat.

Farooq's head snapped up, his face white as death itself. ***"He's not breathing!"*** His voice cracked, thin and desperate. ***"Oh God—OH GOD—HE'S NOT BREATHING!"***

Chaos erupted.

Not just noise—a **physical force**, a tidal wave of panic crashing over us. The Golden Team, always so disciplined, so controlled, now moved in frantic, disjointed bursts. Hands flew to mouths, stifling sobs that broke through anyway. Tears spilled, hot and unchecked, blurring the nightmarish sight of our leader—our **rock**—lying motionless on the cold, hard floor.

"REHAN SIR!"

His name became a chant, a prayer, a plea screamed into the void. Voices cracked, broke, dissolved into raw, wordless grief. ***"Wake up! PLEASE! WAKE UP!"***

The world tilted.

We formed a shaky circle around him, hearts hammering against our ribs like trapped birds. Knees buckled. Some collapsed entirely, unable to stand under the weight of the terror pressing down on us.

Then—

The door **slammed** open.

Anwar Ahmed and Irfan Ahmed burst in, their faces morphing from confusion to **horror** in an instant.

"What happened?!" Anwar's voice was sharp, cutting through the noise.

Then he saw Rehan.

A choked, wounded sound escaped him. His hand flew to his mouth. For one frozen second, he was just like us—lost, shattered.

Then—something shifted.

His shoulders squared. His jaw set.

"HOSPITAL!" His voice was a whip-crack of command, slicing through the hysteria. **"GET HIM TO THE HOSPITAL—NOW!"** He clapped his hands, the sound sharp, jolting us into action. **"MOVE! EVERYONE, MOVE!"**

His words were a lifeline.

We grabbed onto them, clung to them like drowning men.

Hands shaking, we reached for Rehan. Aadil cradled his head, tears splashing onto his pale, lifeless face.

"Carefully," Anwar ordered, his voice tight, betraying the fear beneath. **"Gently now."**

We lifted him. Slowly. Reverently.

Every second was an eternity.

Aadil leaned close as we carried him, his voice breaking beside Rehan's ear. **"No, no, no—Rehan Uncle, wake up!"** His whole body trembled with sobs, his grip on Rehan's hand **bone-crushing**, as if he could transfer his own life into him by sheer force of will. **"Don't leave us! PLEASE—DON'T LEAVE US!"**

His agony was ours.

Because if we lost Rehan, we didn't just lose a leader.

We lost **hope itself**.

Charak Hospital.

The irony was a knife to the gut.

He had walked out of here just days ago, waving off the doctors' warnings with that easy, careless smile of his. **"I'm fine,"** he'd said. **"There's too much work to do."**

Now, we carried him back in, our hearts **splintering** with guilt.

The ER doors flew open. Dr. Bhargav and Dr. Verma rushed forward, their expressions shifting from urgency to **dread** in seconds.

Dr. Bhargav's eyes locked onto the oxygen monitor. His face darkened. **"Oxygen is dangerously low,"** he said, voice clipped. **"Around 60."**

Sixty.

The number hung in the air like a death sentence.

Dr. Verma shook his head, his hand heavy on Anwar's shoulder. **"He needs advanced care. Now. We can stabilize**

him, but he needs more than we have. Every minute is critical."

Every. Single. Minute.

The waiting area was cold, sterile, suffocating. We huddled together, pale, hollow-eyed reflections of one another's terror. Some sat, heads bowed, whispering desperate bargains with God. Others paced like caged animals, the silence unbearable.

Our rock. Our strength.

And all we could do was wait.

And break.

And pray.

On one side, **Muslims**—Anas, Arib, Zeeshan, and dozens more—formed a straight, unbroken line. Shoulder to shoulder, feet planted firm, as if bracing against the storm. Their voices rose together, strong and unflinching, reciting **Surah Al-Fatiha**, then **Ayat-ul-Kursi**, the Arabic verses ringing clear into the night.

"Allāhu lā ilāha illā huw, al-ḥayyul-qayyūm..."

Tears streaked their faces, but their voices never wavered.

Across from them, **Hindus**—Ankit, Mayank, Sudeep, and countless others—stood just as firm, just as unyielding. Their hands pressed together, heads bowed, chanting the **Hanuman Chalisa** with a devotion that shook the ground beneath them.

"Jai Hanuman gyan gun sagar, Jai Kapis tihun lok ujagar..."

Their voices cracked with emotion, but they **pushed through**, louder, fiercer, as if their faith alone could pull Rehan back from the edge.

Tears. Unity. An Unbreakable Force.

Arib's hands shook as he held the Quran, his voice thick with tears, but he **would not stop.**

Mayank's eyes were red, his breath ragged, but he **chanted harder**, as if the sheer force of his belief could mend what was broken.

An old woman, her face lined with years of hardship, clutched her shawl tight, tears streaming down her weathered cheeks. **"He can't die,"** she whispered, voice trembling. **"Who will look after us then? WHO?"**

Five Hours Later.

Five hours. Five centuries.

Anwar's voice was raw from begging on the phone. Irfan ran from hospital to hospital, hope dying a little more with each rejection.

"Please," he begged, hands pressed together, dignity stripped away by desperation. **"He's done so much. He helps everyone. PLEASE—just help him!"**

The answer was always the same.

"No beds."

Each rejection was a knife to the chest.

Then—**Chirayu Hospital, Bairagarh.**

A flicker of hope.

"Let's go," Anwar rasped, wiping his face with a shaking hand. **"NOW!"**

We loaded Rehan into the ambulance, whispering words he couldn't hear, promises we needed to make.

"Hold on, Rehan Uncle," Aadil murmured, hand pressed to his cold forehead. **"Just hold on."**

Chirayu Hospital.

Hope died the moment we arrived.

The manager barely looked up from his desk. **"No beds,"** he said, voice flat. **"Unless you pay upfront. Seven-day package. Fifteen-day package."**

Anwar—strong, unshakable Anwar—**collapsed to his knees.**

"PLEASE!" His voice was a shattered, broken thing. **"He's DYING! We don't need seven days—just SAVE HIM! I'm BEGGING YOU!"**

The manager didn't flinch.

Aadil stood beside the stretcher, watching Rehan's shallow, uneven breaths. Tears blurred his vision. **"Please..."** he whispered. **"Don't let him die. So many need him."**

Then—

A sound.

Rehan's phone.

Aadil fumbled for it, hands shaking violently.

The name on the screen sent a jolt through him.

DIG Irshad Wali.

He answered, voice breaking. **"S-sir... Rehan Sir... he's... he's—"**

"What's happened?" The DIG's voice was sharp, urgent. **"Where are you? TELL ME EVERYTHING."**

Aadil spilled it all—the fear, the desperation, the hospitals turning them away.

A pause.

Then—

"I'll handle it. Don't move."

Fifteen minutes later, **TI Virendra Singh Chouhan** strode in, his presence alone shifting the air. A low, firm conversation with the management.

Suddenly—**"ICU bed ready."**

Relief hit like a tidal wave.

But as they wheeled Rehan away, his face was too still. Too peaceful.

As if he'd already let go.

The ICU Waiting Room.

Two hours.

Two lifetimes.

The doctor finally emerged, his face grave.

We stood as one, hearts in our throats.

"His condition is critical," he said softly. **"Extremely critical. We are doing everything we can, but..."**

He hesitated.

"His chances... are very slim."

The words landed like a hammer blow.

TI Virendra Singh Chouhan, the strong, composed officer, had tears in his eyes as he stepped forward.

"Doctor," he said, voice cracking, **"you don't understand. He isn't just one man."** He gestured to the windows, to the crowds outside. **"Look at them. He's the reason they're still standing. If you save him... you're saving thousands."**

The doctor nodded slowly, his expression softening with understanding.

"We will do everything humanly possible," he promised.

Then he was gone, the ICU doors closing behind him.

Leaving us.

Broken.

Empty.

Holding onto the last, fragile thread of hope.

Because if Rehan didn't come back—

None of us would survive it.





41. Bhopal Holds Its Breath: The City's Collective Prayer for Rehan

The morning after Rehan Golden vanished behind the hospital's sterile doors, the Golden Team moved through their duties like ghosts. The kitchen, once alive with the clatter of pots and the warmth of shared laughter, now felt hollow—a tomb where every sound echoed too loudly in the absence of its heart.

Anwar Ahmed stood over a simmering pot of dal, his wooden spoon stirring mechanically, his mind far away. His shoulders, usually squared with purpose, sagged under an invisible weight. He blinked, his vision blurring, and suddenly the steam rising from the pot wasn't just steam—it was the memory of Rehan's voice, his booming laugh, the way he'd clap a hand on Anwar's shoulder and say, *"Come on, bhai, just a little more—we've got this."*

Anwar's grip tightened on the spoon. His throat worked, words sticking like dry bread. Finally, he turned, his voice cracking under the strain. *"I keep listening for him,"* he admitted, rough and raw. *"His footsteps. That stupid joke he'd make when the rice burned. How—"* His breath hitched. *"How is the air so heavy without him here?"*

Across the kitchen, Irfan Ahmed paused, his hands stilling over the stack of freshly washed plates. His jaw clenched, his own grief a living thing pressing against his ribs. He swallowed hard, forcing the words out. *"It's like the light's gone out,*

Anwar. Like someone turned off the sun." He exhaled, shaky. "How do we do this without him? How do we even breathe?"

Every movement was an effort. Every chore felt like dragging stones. The kitchen, once their sanctuary, was now a battlefield where grief struck silently, relentlessly.

Two days passed. Then three. Imran Ahmed arrived from Makodia, his presence a small comfort, but the hole Rehan had left was too vast to fill. They worked side by side, the silence between them thick and suffocating. Imran tried—*Allah knows he tried*—to lighten the weight. He cleared his throat, forcing a weak smile. *"Remember when Rehan added salt instead of sugar to the kheer?"*

The memory hung in the air, fragile. Once, it would have had them doubled over laughing. Now, it just made the ache worse. No one smiled. No one could.

It was only now, in the crushing quiet, that the truth hit them like a hammer to the chest:

They had never truly seen the weight Rehan carried.

What they'd called teamwork had so often been one man—one man—bearing the burden of ten.

Irfan dragged a hand through his hair, his voice breaking. *"How did he do it?"* The question was barely a whisper, trembling with awe and agony. *"The kitchen. The burials. The endless calls, the organizing—how did he never buckle?"*

Imran's eyes glistened. *"He never complained,"* he murmured. *"Not once. Not even when his hands shook from exhaustion."*

Every hour stretched into eternity. The kitchen, the graveyard—places Rehan had commanded with quiet strength—now felt vast, unmanageable. His absence wasn't just a gap. It was a chasm.

At the burial grounds, local volunteers stepped in, their faces grim. Ten strong men strained under tasks Rehan had somehow shouldered *alone*. A respected social worker, sweat beading on his brow, stared at the freshly dug earth, his voice thick with disbelief. "*How?*" he breathed. "*How did one man do the work of ten?*"

Another volunteer, his shoulders slumped, shook his head. "*And he never asked for help. Never said it was too much.*"

An elderly man, his face lined with years of both joy and sorrow, wiped his eyes with a trembling hand. "*Always giving,*" he whispered. "*Always serving. But this...*" His voice cracked. "*I never saw the weight until now.*"

The truth settled over them like a storm.

Rehan wasn't just their leader.

He was their spine. Their heart.

And now he was fighting for his life, leaving them drowning in the fear that they might never hear his voice again.

The Breaking Point

Days crawled by. Each hospital update was a knife to the chest.

"Rehan's condition is critical."

The word *critical* echoed, sharp and cold, in the hollow spaces between their heartbeats.

Anwar paced the kitchen like a caged animal, his phone clutched in a white-knuckled grip. "*What does that even mean?*" he demanded, his voice fraying at the edges. "*Why won't they tell us more? Why won't they—*"

Irfan caught his arm, his own hands shaking. "*Anwar,*" he said softly, though his voice was rough with unshed tears. "*We have to trust Allah. Trust Rehan's fight.*"

But hope was a fragile thing, thinning with every passing hour.

Then, on a biting Thursday evening, the senior team and city elders gathered in Rehan's office. The air was thick with unspoken terror. Eyes met across the room, all reflecting the same horrifying thought:

Rehan was slipping away.

Imran shattered the silence first. His voice was low, trembling, but fierce. *"We can't leave him there. Alone."* He clenched his fists. *"Not Rehan. He wouldn't want to be—abandoned to machines. If we bring him home—"*

Heads nodded. Voices rose in agreement, thick with desperation.

"We can get doctors. Equipment."

"But not there. Not in that cold place."

An elderly leader, tears streaming freely, spoke through a broken voice. *"He is like my own son. To think of him there, fighting alone—it's tearing me apart."*

Doubt lingered. The hospital had resources. Could they truly do better?

But the image of Rehan—isolated, surrounded by beeping machines, no familiar hand to hold—was unbearable.

Then came the unthinkable realization.

"We need someone with him," someone said, the words heavy. *"Inside the COVID ward."*

Silence.

Everyone understood the cost.

To send someone into the heart of the virus. To risk their own life.

Yet—

Hands rose. Voices, trembling but firm, cut through the fear.

"I'll go."

"No, let me. He stood by us. I stand by him."

In the end, the choice fell on Hamza Golden—Rehan's 20-year-old nephew. Young. Strong. Devoted.

Hamza stood, his heart pounding so hard he feared it would break free of his ribs. His hands shook, but his voice did not.
"I'll do it."

Irfan's face crumpled. *"Hamza—"*

"He's my uncle," Hamza whispered, tears spilling over. *"He taught me courage. Taught me to serve. How can I not go?"*

The Vigil

The next day, Hamza walked through the ICU doors of Chirayu Hospital.

The chemical scent. The relentless beeping. The sight of his uncle—*his Rehan*—small beneath tubes and wires, his chest rising in shallow, uneven breaths—

Something inside Hamza shattered.

He reached out, his fingers brushing Rehan's hand, careful of the IV lines. *"Uncle,"* he whispered, his voice breaking. *"I'm here. We're all waiting. Please—please—fight."*

Days passed in a haze of dread. Rehan weakened. Doctors rushed in, their faces grim.

One evening, Hamza called his father, his voice barely human.
"Dad..."

Irfan's breath caught. *"Hamza? What's happened?"*

"The doctors..." Hamza sobbed. "The next 72 hours... they're critical. They don't know if—"

On the other end, Irfan's knees buckled. The world tilted.

Losing Rehan was unthinkable.

The City's Prayer

That night, the Golden Team made a decision.

Rehan had built bridges his entire life. Now, they would build one for him—out of prayers.

The message spread like wildfire:

"Pray for Rehan Golden. The man who gave everything and asked for nothing."

Mosques dedicated Friday sermons to him. Temples lit lamps. Churches held vigils. Gurdwaras echoed with pleas.

Social media ignited. #PrayForRehan flooded feeds. Strangers—people Rehan had fed during lockdown, families he'd comforted at gravesides—shared stories.

Bhopal, a city of a thousand differences, became one.

From every corner, every faith, every home, the same prayer rose:

"Save him. Please, save him."

Imran watched the messages pour in, tears blurring his vision. *"This,"* he whispered. *"This is what he taught us. Unity. Even now."*

It wasn't just a prayer for one man.

It was a prayer for hope itself.

The Flicker of Light

Five days passed. Each hour an agony.

Then—

A fragile dawn.

"He's out of immediate danger."

The words were not victory. Not yet.

But they were *hope*.

Bhopal exhaled.

The battle wasn't over.

But tonight—

Tonight, hope had a fighting chance.





42. Manpower Running Low, Ambulance Stalls, and 10 Graves Await: A Day of Desperation

The Weight of the Earth. The first light of dawn spilled over the graveyard like a cruel joke—golden hues painting the tombstones, the freshly turned earth, the sweat-streaked faces of men who had not slept. The beauty of the sunrise was a lie. There was no peace here. Only exhaustion. Only grief. Only the unrelenting demand of the dead.

Amir paced the uneven ground, his boots kicking up dust, his hands trembling—not from the morning chill, but from the bone-deep fatigue that had settled into his muscles like poison. His voice, already raw from hours of shouting, cracked as he urged his men forward.

“Move! Please, for the love of God—faster!” The words tore from his throat, ragged with desperation. He dragged a hand across his face, smearing dirt and sweat. *“Five graves. We need five ready before 3 PM. It’s already 10!”*

The number hung in the air like a death sentence: five bodies, five souls. The weight of it pressed down on them all, heavier than the shovels in their blistered hands.

His team moved like ghosts—slow, hollow-eyed, their movements mechanical. Their clothes clung to them, soaked through with sweat despite the morning’s lingering coolness.

One of the men, a gravedigger named Daaga, stumbled, his shovel slipping from fingers rubbed raw.

"Get up!" another worker snarled, his patience frayed to nothing. *"We don't have time for this!"*

Daaga didn't even glare back. He just pushed himself up, his breath coming in shallow gasps, and kept digging. Thud. Scrape. Thud. The rhythm was relentless, punishing.

Then—footsteps. Slow, deliberate.

Mr. Anwar Ahmed approached, his face lined with concern. He took in the scene—the exhausted men, the half-dug graves, Amir's bloodshot eyes.

"Amir? How are things here?" His voice was calm, but beneath it, tension coiled tight.

Amir swallowed hard, his throat dry as dust. *"Sir... we thought the volunteers would help. Some came—ten, maybe fifteen. But most don't know how to dig. They carry water, move supplies... but this?"* He gestured at the graves, his hand shaking. *"This is back-breaking work. And now..."* His voice dropped to a whisper. *"Now the numbers keep rising."*

Mr. Anwar nodded slowly, the lines on his face deepening with understanding. *"I see their struggle too, Amir. This work... it's brutal. It's not what they're used to. They're trying, helping how they know how."*

A deep, ragged sigh escaped Amir, the sound heavy with more than just physical exhaustion. *"I know, sir. I know they mean well."* He rubbed furiously at his red-rimmed eyes, as if trying to wipe away the fatigue. *"But the load... it's too much. Since Mr. Rehan... since he went into the hospital... five of us haven't left this ground. Day. Night. We eat standing up; we collapse for an hour if we're lucky. It's breaking us, sir."* His voice broke on the last words. *"It's just... too much."*

Mr. Anwar's jaw tightened. He looked at the men—their slumped shoulders, their bleeding hands. Without another word, he rolled up his sleeves. *"Show me where to dig."*

For four grueling hours, he worked beside them, his presence a quiet anchor in the storm. Then—Amir's phone rang. The sound was like a gunshot.

He answered, his face draining of color with every passing second. When he finally spoke, his voice was hollow. *"Five more. They're bringing five more."*

Silence.

Then— *"That makes ten."*

The word hung in the air, suffocating. Ten graves. In a single day.

In the Golden Office, Aadil, Mayank, Majid, and a mechanic scrambled to gather tools. The ambulance had broken down near Karod—they had to move fast. Then Aadil's phone buzzed. Mr. Anwar's name flashed on the screen.

"Aadil! What's happening there?" The urgency in Mr. Anwar's voice sent a chill down Aadil's spine.

"Uncle, the ambulance broke down near Karod. Kabeer's driving—there's a patient inside. We're heading there now to fix it."

A pause. Then, too quickly— *"Okay. Go. Handle it."*

Aadil hesitated. *"Uncle... is everything all right at the graveyard?"*

"Yes. Everything's fine."

The lie was paper-thin.

Aadil turned to the others, his face grim. *"Something's wrong. Really wrong."*

Within minutes, Aamir Pathology, Tayyab, and Fahim were racing toward the graveyard. What they found was a nightmare. Men—their men—digging like machines, their movements frantic, their faces gaunt. Aamir Pathology went straight to Amir, gripping his shoulder.

“Amir bhai. We’re here. Tell us what to do.”

Amir’s knees nearly buckled with relief. *“Ten graves,”* he rasped. *“We have to dig ten.”*

The newcomers grabbed shovels and joined the fight against the earth.

Meanwhile, Aadil, Mayank, Majid, and the mechanic reached the broken ambulance in Karod. The mechanic worked fast—within an hour, the engine roared back to life. They rushed the patient to the hospital, then turned back toward the city, their nerves frayed.

Then—another call. Aamir Pathology, his voice breaking.

“Aadil... we need more hands. We can’t keep up.”

Aadil’s grip on the steering wheel turned his knuckles white. *“I know. But there’s no one left to send.”*

The helplessness was a knife in his gut.

Elsewhere, I was with Salman, Sudeep, and Saboor, handing out herbal supplements when Aadil called.

“Faiz bhai—have you finished?”

“Not yet. What’s wrong?”

“The graveyard. Ten graves. They’re drowning, Faiz bhai. We have to go.”

I didn’t hesitate. *“We’re on our way.”*

In the graveyard, Amir's voice cut through the chaos—
“*DON'T STOP! WE CAN'T STOP!*”

Tayyab, his hands bleeding, gasped, “*We're trying—but it's too much!*”

Just then, the rumble of approaching vehicles cut through the sounds of digging. Heads snapped up. Hope, sudden and sharp, flared in Amir's exhausted eyes as he saw me leading a small convoy.

“*They're here!*” he cried out, his voice breaking with relief, pointing a trembling finger. “*Faiz bhai! The others! They've arrived! Keep digging, everyone! Keep digging! We're not finished yet!*”

We piled out of the vehicles, taking in the scene—the desperate pace, the staggering exhaustion, the sheer number of open graves. Despite our own fatigue from the distribution work, we grabbed shovels, our movements purposeful. Our arrival sent a visible surge of adrenaline through the flagging team. Shovels bit into the earth with renewed, desperate speed as the sun began its slow descent, painting the sky in hues of orange and purple, mocking the grimness of their task.

Each grave felt heavier, deeper, more demanding than the last. Muscles burned with an agony that went beyond pain. Lungs felt raw. Backs threatened to seize. But finally, the last grave was finished as the sun dipped below the horizon. We stood among the freshly turned earth, breathing hard, our bodies screaming in protest.

I looked at them—my brothers, my warriors—and spoke softly.
“*Girtey Hein Sheh-Sawaar He Maidan-E-Jung Mein...*”

“*Only the horseman falls in the battlefield; how can a child fall who crawls on his knees?*”

The words settled over us like a prayer.

Then, hand over my heart, “*And as my father taught us... ‘Allah ke Nazdeek Sabse azeem farz khidmat-e-khaq.’ The greatest duty is to serve.*”

In that moment, we understood. We had not just dug graves. We had answered a call greater than ourselves.

That night, in the Golden Office, the senior team made a painful decision—eight men would be sent to the graveyard tomorrow. It was a sacrifice. Another one. But in this war against death, they had no other choice.



"One unforgettable photo from the broadcast by news channel IND24 captured the immense hardship faced by the grave-digging team at Jhada Graveyard. After relentless, non-stop work, their hands grew calloused, marked with blisters—silent testimonies of their sacrifice and dedication in the face of overwhelming challenges."



43. Rehan Defies Death, Removes Oxygen Pipe, Sparks New Life with Message to Bhopal City

The sun crept over Bhopal like a hesitant intruder, its pale light spilling over a city that no longer recognized hope. The air was thick—not with the usual morning mist, but with the suffocating weight of despair. The streets, once alive with the hum of daily life, now stood eerily silent, punctuated only by the distant wail of ambulance sirens. The Golden team, Bhopal's last beacon of resilience, felt the darkness pressing in around them, their spirits frayed at the edges.

What had begun as a mission of compassion had turned into a war of attrition. Their numbers were dwindling. Five of their bravest were out there somewhere, swallowed by the chaos, racing against time in ambulances, battling an enemy they couldn't see. Four more were scattered across the city, their arms laden with herbs and medicines—tiny, fragile shields against a monstrous, invisible foe.

Inside the Golden kitchen, the heart of their operation, the air was heavy with exhaustion and unspoken dread. The usual lively chatter, the clatter of pots, the laughter that had once filled the space—all of it was gone. Now, there was only the slow, mechanical movement of weary hands packing food parcels. Each motion felt heavier than the last, as if the weight of the city's suffering had settled onto their shoulders.

Before, they had packed meals with pride—four rotis, dal, sabzi, and rice, a complete offering of warmth and comfort. Now, the parcels felt shamefully small—just two rotis, dal, and rice. The missing sabzi wasn't just a missing dish; it was a symbol of their dwindling strength, a silent admission that they were losing ground. Every time a parcel left their hands, it carried not just food, but their own quiet guilt. Whispers had reached them—people were disappointed. The very souls they were fighting for felt let down. And that? That cut deeper than any exhaustion.

The hours dragged on, each minute stretching into an eternity. Evening draped itself over the kitchen like a heavy shroud, the dim light casting long shadows over the tired faces of the volunteers. The room, once alive with purpose, now echoed with the ghosts of what had been—laughter, determination, hope. Now, all that remained was the hollow scrape of spoons against nearly empty pots, the quiet sighs of those too drained to speak.

Then—a sound.

The door creaked open.

A group of women stepped inside, their faces lined with worry but their eyes burning with quiet determination. An older woman, her silver hair tied back in a simple bun, stepped forward. Her hands, rough from years of work, clasped together as she met their tired gazes.

"We heard," she said, her voice steady, unshaken by the despair around her. *"We know you're hurting. We don't have much—but we have hands. Let us help. The Golden kitchen fed us when we had nothing. Now, we feed it."*

Her words were like water to parched earth.

The next morning, those same hands—calloused, strong, unyielding—joined theirs. There were no grand speeches, no dramatic declarations. Just silent, shared resolve. Together, they worked. Roti after roti, parcel after parcel. The rhythm of their labor became a quiet anthem of defiance. By sunset, two thousand rotis lay stacked—not just food, but a testament to what happened when a community refused to break.

But the battle was far from over.

Days blurred into weeks, each one a marathon of exhaustion. August 14th arrived—the eve of Independence Day. A day that should have been filled with celebration, with pride, with hope. Instead, it was just another grueling climb up an endless mountain.

The team moved like shadows, their bodies pushed beyond limits they hadn't known they had. No laughter. No energy. Just the slow, aching motions of those running on fumes. Their faces were hollow, their eyes glazed with fatigue. They had given everything—and yet, the darkness only seemed to grow thicker. The kitchen, once a fortress of hope, now felt like the last outpost before surrender.

Then—

A voice. Sharp. Urgent.

"Anas Samad says Mr. Golden's video message is here!"

The words hit like lightning.

"What? Where? When?"

Phones were grabbed, fingers fumbling in desperate haste. And then—there he was.

Rehan Golden.

His name on their screens after weeks of silence.

Tears welled instantly. Hands trembled. Hearts pounded.

They pressed play.

The room stilled.

Rehan's face filled the screen—his eyes closed, his breathing shallow, his voice barely more than a whisper. The oxygen tube was gone, a terrifying absence that spoke of defiance, of a man refusing to let his body's weakness silence him. Every word seemed to cost him dearly, dragged from the depths of his fading strength.

"People of Bhopal..." His voice was a fragile thread, yet it carried the weight of thunder. *"Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian... we fought together for freedom once. Now... now we fight COVID. We must unite again. Help each other. Serve each other. This is a fight... for humanity."*

His words were raw, each one laced with pain, yet burning with unbreakable resolve.

"We will win... like we won independence. Free our lives from COVID. We will fight... and humanity... will win."

The screen went dark.

Silence.

No one moved. No one breathed.

And then—

A sob. A choked, broken sound from one of the volunteers.

"We can't stop now."

Another stood, shoulders squaring despite the exhaustion. *"We keep going. For him. For Bhopal."*

Rehan's agony, his sacrifice, his impossible strength—it had reignited them. This wasn't just about food. It was about

survival. About proving that even in the darkest night, humanity could still shine.

They would face another dawn.

Together.

The City Awakens

Within hours, Rehan's whisper became a roar.

His message exploded across Bhopal, spreading like wildfire. Phones buzzed, screens lit up, voices shared his words in hushed, reverent tones. It was as if the city, holding its breath for so long, had finally exhaled—and with it came a resurgence of will.

Rehan Golden—the man who had defied death itself to speak—had become their symbol.

His face was everywhere. His words, etched into hearts. His pain, mirrored in the eyes of those who watched. His fight, their fight.

"He fights for us," a father murmured to his son, gripping the boy's shoulder tightly as they watched the video, his own fear giving way to something fiercer.

"I will stand with him," one man said to his family as he replayed the video for the third time, his eyes shining with renewed purpose.

A woman, tears streaming down her face, showed the video to her young daughter. *"Look at this man, beti,"* she said softly. *"He is fighting for us. For our future."*

Tears were shed—not just of sorrow, but of fire. Of pride. Of a refusal to surrender.

Rehan Golden, frail and fighting for every breath, had become the heartbeat of Bhopal.

And as long as he fought—so would they.

His whisper, born of agony and defiance, had become the city's battle cry.

In the darkest hour, a single spark had lit the way.

And Bhopal would not let it go out.



"Some memorable photos from a video released by Mr. Golden from his ICU bed became a symbol of resilience. This powerful message not only reignited the spirit of his team but inspired countless others, proving that true leaders inspire even in the toughest times."

Note:- Special thanks to **Dr. Ajay Goenka**, **Dr. Gyaneshwar Mishra**, **Dr. Malika Mishra**, and their entire team. You did more than save Rehan's life—you revived our spirits. In his weakest moments, unsure if he would see another sunrise, you never left his side. With your gentle care and unwavering skill, you held his hand and lifted his courage when it all but vanished. From Rehan, his team, and every heart in Bhopal, thank you. You are our guardian angels, and your love gave us hope when we needed it most. 🙏





Eyes That Spoke: When Rehan Met the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh

The hospital walls whispered with life. Machines hummed gently. Warm sunlight painted the floor with quiet hope.

In Bed No. 7 lay Rehan Golden. His body was still, but his spirit burned. His chest rose and fell—small, precious breaths after weeks battling the virus. His hands, once swift to feed Bhopal's hungry, now lay trembling on the sheets. Alive.

Three rooms away, another warrior fought for air. Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, had stood like a shield for his people. When the pandemic struck, he acted fast—weekend lockdowns, COVID care centers, free treatment. "Stay safe," he pleaded. "Get vaccinated." He worked without sleep, without food. To him, the state was his family. But even shields crack. On July 25, 2020, the virus struck him down.

Yet from his Chirayu Hospital bed, he kept leading—online meetings, guiding his team. His tired voice gave millions hope.

August scorched. Halls echoed with coughs... and quiet courage.

One morning, sunlight kissed the walls. Two wheelchairs met.

Rehan, frail but unbroken, clutched his blanket. The Chief Minister, stripped of his suit, wore a gown drowning his thin frame. Their eyes met—not as leader and citizen, but as survivors.

The CM's hand trembled as he raised it. His voice cracked like dry earth.

"Rehan Golden." No titles. No speeches. Just a name, heavy with respect. "You... you've done great work."

Rehan's throat burned. Here was a man who carried the weight of 85 million *lives* on his shoulders, seeing him—not as a statistic, but an equal. Not with applause, but shared pain.

A machine beeped softly. A nurse wiped her cheeks.

No one spoke of power that day. In that white, silent hall, two men—one famous, one unknown—shared a truth: survival has no rank.

The CM returned to his laptop. Rehan stared at his calloused palms. Both knew the fight wasn't over.

But for one moment, they breathed easier.

(Sometimes, that's enough.)



Golden Light in the Darkest Hour

Outside Golden Kitchen that evening, we huddled—Fahim, Sudeep, Kabeer, and I—worrying about Rehan's fever. Two women shuffled toward us, shadows in the fading light.

"Need food?" I asked.

The older woman shook her head. "We eat because of you," she said, voice trembling. "But our sister... in Lalghati slum. No food reaches there. The children... they cry all night."

Farooq and Aadil exchanged glances. Aadil rubbed his bloodshot eyes. "We're stretched thin," he sighed. "Three neighborhoods already..."

Mehjabeen, Omar Khan, Ali Khan, and Zafar Gul Khan—former IB officer—were distributing food in Khano Gaon. My tired mind sparked.

“Omar Khan!” I dialed without hesitation. Before I finished, his voice cut through: “Done. We’ll feed them.”

Next morning, our teams moved like one family. In Lalghati’s narrow lanes, an old man stepped forward—wrinkled hands, a lifetime of labor. Tears carved paths down his cheeks. “You remembered us,” he whispered. “Allah will remember you.”

Nearby, a young mother cradled a bony infant. When we handed her the packet, she crushed it to her chest. “We prayed,” she sobbed. “Allah sent you.”

Walking back, our empty vans felt lighter. We hadn’t just carried rice and lentils—we’d carried hope. Proof that even in brokenness, small kindnesses mend the world.

(And sometimes, that’s everything.)





44. Hero's Return: Hope Restored to Bhopal

For an entire week, the video of Rehan Golden had spread through Bhopal like wildfire, carried on the winds of hope, whispered in hushed tones, shared between friends and strangers alike. It was more than just a message—it was a lifeline, a beacon cutting through the suffocating darkness of fear and despair.

I remember the first time I saw it—his face, once so full of vigor, now gaunt and pale, his skin stretched thin over sharp cheekbones. His eyes, though sunken, burned with an unyielding fire, a defiance that refused to be extinguished. And his voice—oh, his voice—weak, yes, but laced with a strength that sent shivers down my spine. It wasn't just words he spoke; it was a battle cry, a promise, a prayer.

"We are Bhopal," he had said, his voice trembling yet unbreakable. "We have faced disasters before—fires that tried to consume us, storms that sought to break us. But we are still here. This virus? It is just another battle. And we will win it—not as strangers, not as victims, but as one family. Together."

Those words became our anthem. For us—his team, laboring day and night in the graveyard, in the community kitchens, in the streets where fear had once reigned—it was as if Rehan had reached into the depths of our exhaustion and pulled us back from the edge. Every time our muscles screamed in protest, every time the weight of another lost life threatened to crush us,

every time the smell of disinfectant made our stomachs churn—we remembered his voice. *"Together."* And somehow, we found the strength to go on.

One evening, as the sun dipped low, painting the sky in strokes of orange and pink, Mr. Farooq—our usually stern, unshakable senior—gathered a small group of us. His face, normally etched with the lines of worry, softened. His eyes, so often tired, now shimmered with something we hadn't seen in weeks.

"Stay back tonight," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper, as if sharing a sacred secret. *"We need to clean the office."*

Sudeep, his shoulders slumped from exhaustion, rubbed his red-rimmed eyes. *"Sir, we've been working since dawn. Can't it wait?"*

Mr. Farooq placed a firm but gentle hand on his shoulder, the warmth of his touch seeping through the fatigue. *"I know you're tired. We all are. But trust me—this is important."*

No further explanation was needed. If Mr. Farooq asked, we obeyed. If it was for Rehan, for our team, for Bhopal—we would do it.

And so, we scrubbed. We swept. We polished until our hands were raw, until the scent of bleach clung to our clothes, until the clock ticked past midnight, then 1 AM, then 2. Mr. Farooq worked alongside us, never stopping, never slowing, his determination a silent command. By the time we finished, the office gleamed—floors shining, desks spotless, the air itself feeling lighter.

As we prepared to leave, Mr. Farooq lingered in the doorway, his silhouette framed by the dim light. He turned back, his lips curling into a small, knowing smile.

"Tomorrow will be a good day," he said softly. *"Get some rest."*

The next morning, we arrived at the office, our bodies heavy but our spirits inexplicably lighter. Something was different. The air hummed with anticipation, as if the very walls were waiting.

Mr. Farooq stood at the entrance, arms crossed, but his usual stern expression was gone—replaced by a grin so wide it crinkled the corners of his eyes.

"Kheer and sharbat for everyone!" he announced, gesturing to trays of glistening sweets laid out on the table.

Aamir, ever the curious one, blinked in surprise. *"What's the occasion, sir?"*

We exchanged glances, confused but delighted. The sweetness of the kheer melted on our tongues, filling us with warmth, with comfort. The office, usually a place of weary silence, now buzzed with quiet laughter, with murmured questions.

Then, Mr. Farooq cleared his throat. His hands, usually steady, trembled slightly. His eyes glistened.

"Mr. Rehan..." His voice cracked. *"He's coming back from the hospital today. He wants to see us."*

For a heartbeat, there was silence. Then—gasps. Cries. Disbelieving laughter. Hands clasped together, eyes brimming with tears. After days of whispered prayers, of restless nights wondering if he would ever return—Rehan was coming home.

"But the doctors said—" Mr. Imran began, his voice thick with emotion.

"You know our Rehan," Mr. Farooq interrupted, shaking his head with a fond, exasperated smile. *"He said, 'My team needs me more than my bed does.'"*

We scattered like leaves in the wind, rushing home to change into our best clothes—clean shirts, pressed trousers, shoes

polished until they shone. By 3 PM, we had gathered again, the air electric with nervous energy. Minutes stretched like hours. By 4, whispers began to creep in.

"What if something happened?" Sudeep muttered, pacing like a caged tiger.

Aadil placed a steadying hand on his shoulder. *"Have faith. When has Uncle Rehan ever broken a promise?"*

At 5:30 PM, as the sun blazed its final golden farewell across the sky, we heard it—the distant rumble of engines. Our hearts leapt into our throats. Two cars rolled into view.

And there, in the passenger seat of the first—Rehan Golden.

Time stopped.

He was thinner, his face hollowed by illness, his body frail. But his eyes—those same fierce, unyielding eyes from the video—burned brighter than ever.

Aadil and Mr. Farooq rushed forward, gently helping him out of the car. The moment his feet touched the ground, we surged forward, a wave of emotion crashing over us.

"Sir! You're back!" Zeeshan Ali choked out, tears streaming down his face.

"Arey, piche hato!" Mr. Farooq barked, though his own voice wavered. *"Give him space! He's just left the hospital!"*

We stepped back, but our eyes never left him. Step by slow step, Rehan moved forward, leaning on Aadil and Mr. Farooq, yet standing taller with each passing second.

Inside, he sank into his chair, his breath shallow but his smile radiant. He looked around at all of us—his team, his family—and his lips quivered.

"Kaisa chal raha hai?" he asked softly. *"How is everything?"*

"Very good, sir!" we chorused, our voices thick with unshed tears.

"We missed you so much," Sudeep blurted, swiping at his cheeks.

Rehan's eyes welled up. *"I missed you all too,"* he whispered. *"Every second in that hospital, I thought of you—working, fighting, never giving up."* His voice broke. *"I knew... I knew I could count on you."*

He reached out, gripping the hands of those nearest to him. His fingers were cold, but his grip was iron.

"We are not just a team," he said, his gaze sweeping over each of us. *"We are family. And family? We stand together. Through fire. Through storms. Through anything."*

"Sir, you should be resting," Zeeshan murmured, though his own face was wet with tears.

Rehan shook his head, a stubborn light in his eyes. *"How can I rest when my family is fighting? Your strength gave me strength. Your courage brought me back."*

In that moment, something shifted. The fear, the exhaustion—it didn't vanish, but it no longer felt insurmountable. Because Rehan was here. And if he could rise from his sickbed to stand with us, then we could face anything.

"Tomorrow," he said, his voice growing stronger, *"we fight harder. Not just for ourselves—for every person in Bhopal who needs hope."*

That evening, we stayed late. We laughed. We cried. We shared stories under the dim glow of the office lights. It wasn't just Rehan who had returned that day.

Hope had come back to Bhopal.

And with it, the unshakable belief that no matter how dark the night, dawn would always come.

The doctors had ordered four weeks of rest.

Rehan returned in six days.

That's why we called him *Golden*—not just for his name, but for the light he carried within him, a light that refused to be dimmed, even in the darkest of times.



Part V: The Echoes of a War



45. Tensions Peak: Officials Alarm Over Shab e Barat Gatherings

The pain from the past year had not gone away. It stayed—deep, raw, carved into the world, into the streets of Bhopal, into the hearts of those who had fought its unseen war.

2021 did not bring hope. It brought clenched fists and gritted teeth. The city felt like it was holding its breath, choking under the weight of the lockdown. People went hungry. Medicine disappeared from shops. Behind closed doors, silent suffering spread.

And in the middle of it all—Rehan Golden.

The man walking these streets now was not the same as before. The old Rehan had been strong. But the Rehan of today? He was different.

The virus had tried to kill him. It had dragged him to death's door, left him fighting for air. But he had crawled back—not just alive, but stronger. His body had recovered. His spirit, once tired, now burned with a fire no one could put out.

When he walked into a room, people noticed. His presence was not just strong—it pulled them in. His eyes, once tired, now shone with something fierce: the look of a man who had faced death and refused to back down.

His movements were quick. His voice firm. Every word mattered. Every choice was careful.

When he spoke, people listened. When he led, they followed without question. His team stood firm, like a flame that wouldn't die. And Rehan, back from the edge of death, seemed unstoppable—his will harder than ever. His small office had become their shelter from the storm.

Rehan's Office – Night, March 12–13, 2021

Tonight, the air felt heavier—tense, thick with fear. The death count kept rising. The city was falling apart.

Then—a small light in the dark.

Rehan's uncle arrived. At seventy-five, he was old, yes—but his heart was stronger than most young men. He had come alone from Mumbai just to stand with Rehan.

That morning, Rehan had begged him: "Please, stay in the kitchen. Let others do the hard work."

His uncle had refused. "Do you think I'm weaker now?" he said with a smile.

And so, he went to the graveyard to help bury the dead.

Later, Farooq pulled Rehan aside, his voice low with worry. "Your uncle shouldn't take these risks."

Rehan didn't answer. But his face—the tight jaw, the hard eyes—said everything.

Then—

SCRAPE. COUGH.

The sound made them turn. The door opened. Anwar Ahmed—Rehan's older brother—stood there, pale, breathing hard. Behind him, others carried bags of PPE kits and sanitizer. The rustle of plastic filled the quiet room as they stacked the supplies.

COUGH. HACK.

A rougher sound this time. Farooq grabbed a water bottle and held it out. “Anwar Sir... are you okay?”

Anwar nodded weakly and tried to smile. But his breaths were short, painful.

Rehan’s eyes locked onto his brother—sharp, worried. He watched every shaky breath, every unsteady movement. As Anwar dropped into a chair, Rehan leaned close, his voice firm but quiet.

“Anwar Bhai... you’re pushing too hard. This cough—it’s getting worse. You need to rest.”

Anwar waved him off, forcing a grin. “Rest? I’m stronger than you!” He tried to laugh, but it turned into another rough cough, louder than his words.

The lie was obvious.

Rehan didn’t smile back. His eyes darkened.

As they kept planning, Anwar’s coughing was a grim reminder of the danger.

Then—

RING. RING.

Rehan looked at his phone. A small smile flickered at the caller’s name—then vanished as he answered. His body tensed.

“Yes... I understand the problem. We’ll handle it. We have to find a way.”

His voice was calm, professional. But beneath it was strain.

Everyone watched him. He paced for ten long minutes, his shoulders tight with each step. When he finally hung up, his face was grim.

Anwar, leaning forward despite his pain, asked: "What is it, Rehan? Who was that?"

Rehan let out a slow breath. "A government official. About Shab-e-Barat." He paused, letting the weight of the sacred name settle in the tense air. "It's on the night of March 28th, and he warned us... the graveyard." Thousands will come to pray for the dead. It's tradition, sacred. But the crowds... we can't control them safely. If we don't act, the virus could spread fast. They want us to stop people from coming... or at least limit the numbers."

Farooq went pale. "Rehan Sir... Jhada graveyard is the biggest in the state. Shab-e-Barat is sacred. People connect with their ancestors there. This is... incredibly sensitive. Maybe... this is one fire we shouldn't touch."

Rehan's gaze fixed on Farooq—steady, unshaken. His voice turned hard.

"Farooq... if we all step back from hard tasks because they're dangerous, what kind of world are we making? Who will stand up?"

Anwar nodded slowly, his breathing still rough, but his eyes firm. "He's right. Rehan... I know you. You'll find a way. But we need a smart plan—careful steps. Think it through, then we act."

Outside – The Team's Fear

While the leaders talked inside, a few of us—me, Javed, Sudeep, Saboor, Fahim, and Kabeer—stepped out. Javed needed a smoke.

We walked to the old State Bank building, its empty walls a familiar sight. The same place where Rehan Golden once parked his favorite car... before he sold it to feed the hungry.

Javed lit a cigarette, taking a deep drag. Kabeer broke the silence, saying what we all feared.

“This Shab-e-Barat thing... it feels impossible. And risky.”

Saboor shook his head. “I don’t get why Rehan Sir agreed. It’s asking for trouble.”

Fahim nodded. “How do we control so many people? For something this emotional?”

I tried to sound calm. “Rehan Uncle wouldn’t take this lightly. He must have a plan—even if we don’t see it.”

Sudeep, always loyal, added: “I trust Rehan Sir. Once he decides, he makes it happen.”

We all agreed. Rehan’s will was unbreakable. But still...

“True,” I said. “But how? Thousands packed together... it’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

Sudeep sighed. “We’ll see. We have to trust him.” But he didn’t sound sure.

As we walked back toward the light from Rehan’s office, one question hung in the air:

Could even Rehan stop this disaster?





46. The Weight of Impossible

Choices March 15, 2021

The time was around 3 pm. The air in Rehan's office was thick with tension. The senior team sat together—faces tired, tense. Anwar Ahmed's hands shook slightly as he moved papers. His cough was quieter now, but still there.

Amir, in charge of the graveyard, stared at the floor, jaw tight, along with Imran Ahmed, Irfan Ahmed, Arib Samad, Anas Samad, Aadil Irshad, and Police Officer Virendra Singh Chouhan.

Silence. Heavy. Suffocating.

Shab-e-Barat was days away. A night to remember the dead—now a ticking bomb. Thousands would come to mourn. Pray. Stand close together.

Disaster seemed certain.

Fear filled the room.

Amir finally spoke, his voice strained. "What if... we block the roads? Seal the whole area. No one gets in."

Anwar shook his head. "Won't work. People will crowd at the barricades—angry, packed together. We just move the problem to the streets."

Silence. Even heavier.

Anas spoke next, his voice sharp with stress. “Then we control the crowd. Let small groups in at a time.”

Rehan leaned forward, his eyes sharp. “Think, Anas. Small groups inside, yes. But outside? The line will stretch for miles. Same chaos, just outside the gates. People will get frustrated.”

His words cut through the hope.

Another idea—strict time limits for prayers.

Rehan shook his head. “This isn’t a line for tickets. It’s Shab-e-Barat. People are grieving. They won’t leave just because we say so. It could turn violent.”

Every idea fell apart.

The clock kept ticking.

Dinner came. Grew cold. No one ate.

Time slipped away.

Finally, Chouhan left, called away by duty. The rest stayed, trapped in the impossible.

They stared into the darkness.

And the darkness stared back.

Outside – The Waiting

Behind the closed door, the rest of us waited. Nerves on edge. Eyes glued to the meeting room. Whispers spread like wildfire.

“They can’t find a way...”

“Maybe we should just... back off? Tell the officials it’s too risky?”

The thought hung there—heavy with defeat. But unspoken.

They were too deep in now.

By 1 AM, the waiting was unbearable. Some sipped cold tea. Others stepped out to smoke, their eyes always returning to Rehan's door.

Sudeep whispered, his voice tight: "Faiz... what's happening in there? What can they even decide?"

I tried to sound steady. "No idea. But whatever it is..." I trailed off.

Sudeep leaned closer. "What if they just... let it happen? Families packed together, no masks, no space... What if the virus spreads because of this?"

I nodded slowly. The thought was terrifying. "That's the worst. But the other choices... blockades? People could riot. Everyone's already on edge."

Sudeep ran a hand through his hair. "Exactly. This is a bomb waiting to explode. We need a real plan—not guesses."

I looked at the worried faces around me. "We have to stay calm. Panic won't help."

"Easy to say," he shot back. "But what if they pick something impossible? What if we can't do it? What if—"

CREAK.

The door opened. Aadil stepped out, his face exhausted. He looked at the waiting group. Took a deep breath.

"Listen. Everyone comes back tomorrow at 11 AM sharp." A pause. Then— "And tell Amir... his whole graveyard team needs to be here too."

The words hit like a punch.

No answers. Just orders.

The weight of the unknown pressed down.

As we walked away into the night, fearful whispers followed.

“What are they going to do?”

“I don’t know...” I said, my throat tight. “But it feels like we’re on the edge of something...”

Sudeep’s voice was barely a whisper. “I can’t shake this feeling, Faiz. It’s like waiting for a storm... and the sky just gets darker.”

Tomorrow—11 AM.

All they could do was wait.

The waiting itself was crushing.

3:17 AM – Rehan, Alone

Farooq found him like that—staring at a photo on the wall. His brother—Irshad Ahmed.

He didn’t know how long Rehan had been standing there.

Still. Silent.

Lost in the weight of what was coming.



The Day of Decision: A Call to Action, March 16, 2021

I arrived at the Golden Office around 6 a.m., later than the rest—most of us were here by 5 or 5:30, some even at 4 a.m. A soft steam rose from countless cups of tea, warm and sweet in the cool morning air. Adil Irshad, Farooq, Mujahid, Anas Samad, Abid, and Majeed were stacking toast sacks in neat rows. Tayyab, Zeeshan, Farhan, and Arib Samad filled

thermoses, their breath visible with each exhale. We glanced at each other, sharing the unspoken question: *What if today changes everything?*

A faint call to prayer drifted in from a distance. For a moment, time slowed—our hearts beat in that space between sound and silence. Then the door creaked, and we shook off our thoughts.

Within thirty minutes, our tea-and-toast team stepped out into the dawn. We each carried a simple box of hope, our steps matching the rhythm of our resolve. Javed walked beside me toward the bus stand by the old railway station. The rails lay bare under soft light, as if waiting for our promise.

“I hope for the best,” Javed said, voice low, *“and by best, I mean staying out of this.”*

I paused to adjust a lid on a thermos and glanced at him. The metal was warm in my hand. *“Why think like that? Our senior team has a plan. We’re part of it.”*

He kicked at a pebble on the pavement. *“Still, what if it’s too much?”*

A sudden breeze carried the scent of dust and tea. I closed my eyes, tasting that calm moment before service. *“We’ll do our part,”* I said. *“That’s all we can do.”*

We resumed distributing tea and toast. Then an old man emerged from the shadows—his clothes worn thin, hair tangled, face creased by years on the street. His eyes held quiet surprise when we offered him tea and toast.

“Most people won’t come near us,” he said, voice trembling. *“They think we’ll contaminate them because we live on the streets. If people like you leave us too, who will look after us? Will we die of hunger?”*

A bird cried overhead. For a heartbeat, Javed and I said nothing. The old man's words settled between us like a verdict. Finally, Javed's shoulders shook.

"That man taught us something," he whispered. "Someone must take responsibility."

I nodded, feeling my pulse in my throat. *"Our seniors will. And we'll follow their lead."*

The rails behind us gleamed as the sun climbed. A soft flashforward crossed my mind—I pictured the graveyard at dawn: thousands of people had gathered, we had failed to control them, and things had gone terribly wrong. A chill ran down my spine. Then, in fear, I opened my eyes. On our way back to the Golden Office, my mind couldn't think about anything else.

By 10:30, the Golden Office hummed with tension. Some of us gripped our boxes, eager to act. Others glanced at the door, doubtful. At 10:45, the room fell silent when Mr. Anwar Ahmed entered. His calm presence was like the hush before rain. Behind him came Mr. Rehan Golden, Mr. Imran Ahmed, Mr. Azhar Ali, Mr. Farooq, Adil Irshad, Anas Samad, Arib Samad, Mehboob, and other key members. We filled every chair, mattress, and inch of floor.

A single floorboard creaked under someone's weight. I caught my breath. Then Anwar spoke.

"Kaise ho, janbazo?" (How are you, warriors?)

We straightened, hearts lifting at his greeting.

"Before we begin, remember what my elder brother Irshad Ahmed taught me. Repeat after me:"

"The greatest duty in Allah's eyes is to serve humanity.

Allah ke nazdeek sabse azeem farz khidmat-e-khalq."

Our voices rose, soft at first, then strong. On the third echo, the windows trembled. We were no longer individuals; we were one.

Anwar's gaze swept over us. *"We face a choice: stay in our comfort zone or step into responsibility. Those who choose comfort are useless—in families, in society, and in God's eyes. Would a father praise a son who ignores his duties? Would God love a soul that cares only for itself?"*

He let the question hang. I felt my own doubt surface—then fade. I pressed my hand to my chest, where my heart still thundered.

"So what do you want? Comfort, or responsibility—a life of care, sympathy, and love for others? If anyone wants to leave, now is the time. We bear no ill will."

Silence. My knuckles whitened around the edge of my seat. No one moved.

Anwar nodded. *"No one's leaving. We all choose responsibility."*

Then, with sharp clarity: *"Are you ready, warriors?"*

"Yes—we are ready!" we roared, the room rocking with our unity.

He asked again, louder: *"Are you ready?"*

"Yes—we are ready!" Our voices shook the walls.

Imran Ahmed rose before Rehan could speak. His eyes shone.

"Great responsibility brings great challenges. We hold our community's future in our hands. Our next steps define our legacy."

He paused, and I felt a shiver run through me—fear and excitement intertwined.

“Together, we will rise! Let’s turn fear into action. Our failures echo through our community, but so will our success.”

He shared a simple Urdu couplet:

“Jab himmat ki jaulani hai,

Toh patthar bhi phir paani hai.

Uth, band kamr kya dartaa hai,

Phir dekh, Khuda kya karta hai.”

(When courage surges, even stones turn to water. Rise up—why fear? Then see what God will do.)

As he spoke, I saw hope ignite in every eye. That flashforward of empty circles vanished, replaced by fierce determination.

Imran smiled and nodded at Rehan. *“Now, Rehan will explain our plan.”*

Rehan stood, shoulders squared, voice steady.

“This challenge is hard—but no will is stronger than ours. God stands with those who act. We have a step-by-step strategy. Officials— DIG Irshad Wali; the collector; TI Virendra Singh Chouhan; and others—promise support. But the work lies with us. Here is our plan.”



Action Plan: Laying the Foundation

Step 1: Spreading the Word

“First, reach every mosque imam, social-media voice, and community leader. Ask people to pray from home. If they must visit the graveyard, only one per family.”

A distant crow echoed.

“This won’t stop everyone, but it will thin the crowd. Each of you must tell friends, family, neighbors—don’t assume someone else has told them. Better they hear it twice than not at all.”

We answered in unison: “Yes, sir!”

Step 2: Mobilizing Volunteers

Rehan turned to Nadeem and Mayank.

“How many volunteers?”

“Forty-eight, sir.”

“We need 300 for the final day. Each of you must bring six or seven more. I’ll find thirty to fifty myself. Lists by March 24—give them to Aadil, Farooq, or Faiz.”

“Yes, sir!” Our promise rang out.

Step 3: Pre-Cleaning and Disinfection

“The graveyard must be clean,” Rehan told Amir. *“Your team will disinfect before and during the event. Lives depend on it.”*

Amir’s eyes reflected the weight of trust.

Step 4: Spacing Markers

“Place small circles on the ground—markers of hope. They keep people apart but hearts together.”





Final Day: Execution

Designated Entry and Exit Routes for All Gates Leading to the Graveyard

Rehan drew paths in the air.

“We’ll guide people in and out to avoid crowds.” Teams were assigned:

- Khalid + 6: Shabban Chouraha Road
- Daud Khan + 6: Jail Road
- Javed Qureshi + 6: Jhada Road
- Anas Khan + 6: CI Colony Road
- Fahim + 6: Ahirpura Road

Mask Distribution

“No one enters without protection.” Guardians:

- Kabeer Ali + 5: Shabban Chouraha Road
- Shoaib Khan + 5: CI Colony Road
- Zeeshan Ali + 5: Ahirpura Road
- Adnan Anwar + 5: Jail Road
- Farhan Anwar + 5: Jhada Road

Temperature Checks

Health sentinels at each gate:

- Aamir Pathology + 10: Jhada Road
- Mayank + 10: Shabban Road
- Nadeem + 10: CI Colony Road
- Faizan Ahmed + 10: Jail Road
- Arib Samad + 10: Ahirpura Road

“If fever shows, stop them and call Aadil, Faiz, or me.”

Sanitizer Stations

“Yaman, Azeem, Majid, Mustafa, Murtuja, Alameen Abid, Tayyab, Taha, Zeeshan Anwar—set up stations everywhere.”

Loudspeaker Announcements

“Six angels on scooters will remind people to stay safe.” Aamir Lala, Sudeep, Saad, Salman, Mairaj, and Faheem led this.

Security & Exit

“Farooq—lead 25 to enforce guidelines.”

“Mehboob, Mujahid—take 20 to manage exit crowds.”

Waste Management

“Amir’s graveyard team and our kitchen team—ten each—will clear masks and gloves safely.”

Rehan’s final words:

“Aadil Irshad is your guide. If trouble rises, find me or Anas Samad. Aadil and Faiz will walk among you all night, solving problems before they grow.”

Silence fell, thick as prayer. Then Rehan quoted ancient verse:

“Girtey Hein Sheh-Sawaar Hi Maidan-E-Jung Mein,

Woh Tifil Kya Girey Ga Jo Ghutno Ke Bal Chalay.”

(Only mounted warriors fall in battle; what would a crawling child know of falling?)

His eyes shone. *“We are those warriors. We chose this path because it’s right. When we fall, we rise stronger. Together, we will triumph.”* The room held its breath—then exhaled in a single, unbreakable vow.





47. "The Longest Night and the Biggest Challenge of the Shab-e- Barat Festival"

The air itself felt charged that evening. You could almost taste it – a sharp mix of prayers whispered on the wind and a fear that tightened your chest. This was it. The night. Every single sleepless hour, every plan drawn and redrawn, every shared cup of tea boiling with nerves and strategy – it all led to this moment. Our insides hammered against our ribs as the final countdown began. We weren't just a team anymore. Somewhere in the long nights and shared worries, we had forged ourselves into family.

At the very heart of it, steady as a rock in a rough sea, stood Rehan Golden. Our leader. His strength wasn't loud; it didn't need to be. It radiated from him, a quiet certainty like a lighthouse beam cutting through the darkest storm, showing us the way, giving us courage. You trusted him. You just did. Beside him, Aadil Irshad, calm as deep water, was the master of details, making sure every single piece was in its place. Anas Samad and I watched them, hearts pounding like drums, ready, aching to play our parts. What began as a duty had become a fire in our blood, a brotherhood.

"One more check," Rehan's voice would cut through the exhaustion during those endless practice runs. Again and again, we drilled our roles until they felt like breathing. Tonight, failure wasn't an option. There was zero room for error. His

nephews, his closest friends, trusted pillars like Majid, Abid, Mehboob, and Mujahid – they were like extensions of his own hands, his own determination. Every man was ready to pour everything he had into this night.

As true darkness swallowed the last light, Rehan pulled us close for one final huddle. His voice was soft, barely above a whisper, yet it reached into every single one of us, settling deep in our bones.

“Tonight,” he started, his gaze locking with each man’s, holding it, “this isn’t just about getting a job done. This is about keeping our word. This is about proving that when we stand shoulder-to-shoulder, nothing can break us. Nothing.”

We stood there, in the heart of the graveyard. Tombstones threw long, eerie shadows as the light died completely. A soft breeze rustled the leaves, like a whispered blessing, urging us on. There was no looking back. Every man knew his mission. It was burned into his mind.

Like clockwork, teams exploded into position. Khalid, Daud Khan, Javed Qureshi, Anas Khan, Fahim – they became the gatekeepers, locking down the roads circling the graveyard. At every single entrance point, Kabeer Ali, Shoaib Khan, Zeeshan Ali, Adnan Anwar, and Farhan Anwar were the first line, eyes sharp, voices firm but respectful, meticulously checking every arriving soul, making sure masks were worn, worn correctly. Scooters buzzed like determined hornets, volunteers weaving through the pathways, reminding everyone of the rules. The sharp, clean scent of hand sanitizer cut through the night air. Farooq’s security team moved like watchful ghosts, patrolling the grounds, while Mehboob and Mujahid had already mapped every possible escape route, just in case. Five temperature stations, commanded by Aamir Pathology, Mayank, Nadeem, Faizan, and Arib Samad, each supported by ten dedicated

volunteers, stood like sentinels against the growing darkness, ready.

The sun finally bled away below the horizon. The full weight of what we were doing, the lives potentially in our hands, pressed down hard. But we stood taller.

6 p.m. The first visitors arrived. For a while, it worked beautifully. A steady, manageable flow. Rehan moved among us, a ghost of a smile on his face, that calm presence radiating outwards. A quiet word here, a reassuring hand on a shoulder there – it was enough to steady any fraying nerve.

But then... the trickle became a stream. The stream became a river. And the river threatened to become a flood. The crowd swelled, pushing, pressing. The pressure cranked up, notch by painful notch. I saw flickers of worry in the eyes around me, mirrored in my own reflection on a polished tombstone. But then I'd catch sight of Rehan, standing solid amidst the growing chaos, and the fear would recede. The courage would surge back.

We weren't just workers taking orders. We were warriors. Defenders. Fighting for something bigger than any one of us. To our left, to our right, brothers stood firm, bound together by the fire we'd walked through to get here.

Aadil moved through the thickening crowd like smoke, his low, steady voice a lifeline in the rising noise: *"Stay calm. Remember your training."*

And we did. We held the line.

Rehan's nephews were everywhere, young legs tireless, weaving through knots of people, their energy infectious, gently but firmly guiding everyone to follow the safety rules. His own brothers – Imran, Anwar, Irfan – worked with a fierce,

quiet dedication, their blood bond seeming to stretch out, pulling all of us into their circle of commitment.

A wave of relief washed over us when the flashing lights announced the arrival of the government officials. DIG Irshad Wali, TI Virendra Singh Chouhan, ASP Alim Ahmed – they brought not just authority, but vital backup. Rehan greeted them with profound respect, yet his eyes never stopped scanning the grounds, his mind clearly still orchestrating the defence. Aadil, beside him, mentally ticked off another box, absorbing their presence into the plan.

“Aadil bhai!” The call cracked through the radio at 10:00 p.m. Urgent. Anas Khan. *“Jail Road entrance – the crowd! It’s getting too big! We’re losing control!”*

Without a flicker of hesitation, Aadil directed ten more volunteers, sending them sprinting towards the pressure point. In less than twenty minutes, Anas and his reinforced team had wrestled the chaos back into order. Smoothly. Efficiently.

11:00 p.m. The night hit its absolute peak. The air thrummed with the sheer volume of humanity. Volunteers on scooters – Aamir Lala, Sudeep, Saad, Salman, Mohd Faheem – became mobile command posts, their loudspeakers crackling reminders: *“Keep distance! Mask up, please! Properly!”* The streets pulsed with life, a fragile balance held only by our sheer, unwavering will.

After midnight, a different kind of army moved in. Amir and his cleaning team slipped like shadows between the graves. The soft hiss of their disinfectant sprayers was a quiet sound in the darkness, a job most wouldn’t notice, but utterly critical to our promise of safety.

3:00 a.m. Aamir Pathology’s urgent whisper came over the comms: *“Aadil bhai, problem. Jhada Road entrance.”*

A small cluster of people were refusing the temperature check, arguing. Aadil was there in moments. No raised voice. Just calm, steady words. Simple. Direct. Unshakeable. The resistance crumbled. Order restored.

As the very first, faint blush of dawn stained the eastern sky, Mehboob and Mujahid began gently guiding the last few visitors towards the exits. Amir's cleaning crew followed close behind, methodically gathering discarded masks, used gloves, restoring the hallowed ground to its peaceful dignity.

By 6:30 a.m., silence fell. It was done. Our bodies screamed with exhaustion, muscles burning, throats raw. But inside, a quiet, warm light began to glow. Rehan stood before us. His eyes were bloodshot, rimmed with red from the sleepless vigil, but they shone with a fierce, raw pride and deep, overwhelming emotion.

"We did it," he breathed, his voice thick, heavy with feeling. *"This... this wasn't just about getting through a night. This was about protecting lives. Our community. And that,"* his voice gained strength, ringing now, *"is exactly what we did."*

Rehan's gaze swept across our tired, grimy faces, seeing every man, acknowledging every sacrifice. Then, with passion rising in his voice, he recited his favorite lines of Urdu poetry:

"Girtey Hein Sheh-Sawaar Hi Maidan-E-Jung Mein, Woh Tifil Kya Girey Ga Jo Ghutno Ke Bal Chalay." (It is the warriors, the riders, who fall on the battlefield, How can a child fall, who only crawls on his knees?)

His words hung in the air, reminding us: true strength isn't about avoiding falls. It's about daring to ride into battle, facing the risks, taking the hits, and getting back up. Then, his voice softening, filled with gratitude, he continued, *"I must give special thanks. To DIG Irshad Wali, for believing in us, for his unwavering support. To TI Virendra Singh Chouhan and ASP*

Alim Ahmed, for their masterful handling of the immense crowds. To Zakir Ahmed, for making sure we never ran short of thermometers or masks. Each one of you,” he looked towards where the officials had stood, then back at us, *“is a hero tonight.”*

The night had stretched us thin, tested our limits, pushed us to the breaking point. But as the morning sun painted the sky in soft pinks and brilliant golds, we knew. We knew we had held the line. We knew we could face whatever came next. Shoulder to shoulder. Heart to heart. One family. United.

As our exhausted team finally began to drift away, seeking desperately needed rest, one man lingered. Mr. Farooq, readying himself to leave, saw him – Mr. Rehan Golden, walking slowly, heavily, back into the now empty, silent graveyard. Something about the way Rehan moved, a weight that wasn't just tiredness, made Farooq pause. Curious, concerned, he followed quietly, keeping his distance.

Rehan's steps were leaden as he navigated the familiar paths, stopping only when he reached one particular grave: Irshad Ahmed's. And there, finally, the immense strength that had carried us all through the night shattered. He collapsed to his knees before the cold, unfeeling stone. The leader's mask dissolved, and pure, raw grief poured out of him. Tears streamed down his face, unchecked, each one carrying the weight of memory, of loss, of unspoken promises. His voice, when it came, was a choked whisper tearing through the quiet morning air.

“Oh, Irshad bhai... My brother. My guide.”

His breath hitched on a sob. *“Without you... I feel like a ship with no anchor, lost on a dark sea. The world thinks you are gone, but bhai... I feel you here.”* He pressed a hand to his heart. *“With every breath I take. Your words... they still ring in*

my ears. Your dreams... they burn inside me. I promise you,”
his voice grew thick with fierce resolve, *“I will keep your memory alive. I will finish the work you started. No matter the cost. No matter how hard it gets.”*

Hidden among the shadows of the tombstones, Mr. Farooq felt his own eyes sting. He wouldn't intrude. This was sacred ground, a moment of profound, private pain.

As the sun climbed higher, washing the graveyard in warm, golden light, a deeper understanding settled over the quiet stones. We hadn't just managed a crowd. We hadn't just survived a challenging night. We had honoured a legacy. We had kept Irshad Ahmed's spirit burning brightly. In our unity, in our exhaustion, in Rehan's tears, his dreams, his courage, his deep love for our community – they lived on.

And there, in the quiet stillness, bathed in the morning sun, a new promise took root. Stronger than stone. A promise that would endure.



A memorable Shab-e-Barat night photo shows (left to right) Aamir Pathology, Aamir Lala, CSP Alim Khan, TI Virendra Singh Chouhan, and Anas Khan, with Daud Khan in the background.



Here are some blurry yet memorable photos of the mobilizing team, captured from a video, so the quality isn't the best.



Aadil, microphone in hand, politely asked visitors to leave after their prayers, with Azeem to his right and Faiz at the back.



Visitors are leaving through the exit gate of the graveyard.



Golden team in action in front of the graveyard office.



After conquering the Shab-e-Barat challenge, Mr. Golden appears in a social media interview, with Aamir Pathology visible at right behind him.



On the left, Daud is partially visible, followed by Aadil in white holding a microphone. Next to him are Azeem, Faraz, and Mr. Farooq, with Faiz positioned at the back.

Part VI: The Weight of Memory



48. The Mystery Donor: Hidden Generosity, Unyielding Hope

July 2024. The sky above Bhopal poured tears. Rain fell without end, turning streets into wild rivers. Mr. Farooq had returned to the city for just a few days. My heart squeezed tight as I went to meet him. In my bag, I carried the almost-finished story of our lives – a book holding ninety percent of our heart. The bag's strap dug into my shoulder. Its weight felt exactly like the heavy sadness inside me. Outside, the storm screamed and crashed, matching the frightened beat of my own heart.

I found him in the Golden Office. But the room felt like a grave. Gone was the loud, happy noise of our team. Now, only a deep, empty silence screamed. It was dark. It was hollow. He sat with Mr. Imran and a few others, but his eyes looked far away, fixed on a blank wall. The sadness on his face cut deep. He looked like a man standing under a waterfall, staring at the cold, black ashes of the home that once held all his warmth and light.

This book was my last hope. My only chance to glue together the pieces of our broken past. With so few of us left, I had gathered every single memory I could find.

I placed the thick pile of pages on the table before Mr. Farooq. His voice was a whisper, but it hit like thunder in the quiet room. "*A ghost is missing,*" he said.

His finger tapped an empty space in my notes. *"Sudeep's shadow man... he was more than just a name we never knew, wasn't he?"*

I looked from the book to their faces. *"But,"* I said, my voice shaking, *"why do we need to mention this mystery helper? He only came sometimes... and then he vanished."*

Mr. Imran's eyes locked onto mine. Mr. Farooq sighed, a sound full of deep tiredness. *"So what? Whatever he was, whenever he came... his help was too big to ignore, Faiz. It was everything. It must be in the book."*

Uncle Imran's voice was softer than Mr. Farooq's, but heavy, like the dark storm clouds pressing down outside. *"And why do you think,"* he asked gently, *"Sudeep never spoke his name?"*

That one question, sparked by my book's pages, broke open the dam holding back their memories.

Mr. Farooq said, *"Imran, you remember? Even when Sudeep was gone—that time he was in the hospital for two or three weeks—we still got an envelope."*

Mr. Imran nodded slowly, lines forming on his forehead. *"But that was the strange part. When Sudeep was here, the envelope was given right to him. When he was gone, we found it hidden. I remember Tohid saw a masked man leaving the kitchen. When he went inside, the envelope was lying there."*

A spark of memory lit Mr. Farooq's eyes. *"And Nadeem saw him too! Walking away from the office. But at that moment, he looked like just another person on the street. Nadeem didn't think anything of it, not until he came inside and Tohid told him what happened."*

"And do you remember," Imran leaned forward, *"that one night we had a really good day? We were all singing and*

dancing in the hall. The next morning, we found another envelope, same as always, but this one was empty."

Mr. Farooq looked at Imran, thinking hard. *"Remember the guesses the boys made? Some were sure the helper had to be someone from your family, helping us secretly."*

A sad smile touched Imran's lips. *"They did. I remember the whispers. They couldn't believe a stranger would care so much. They thought it had to be one of us, watching from the inside."* He paused, looking straight at Farooq. *"And some thought it was a team member, didn't they? Someone who saw our pain up close, every single day."*

Their words stuck to me like wet mud, impossible to shake off. Their questions threw me back into our very darkest days.

Our team was lost, drowning in foggy sadness. The bright fire of Rehan Golden, which had once been our guiding star, was almost gone. The pandemic had blurred our days into one long, grey hurt. Our money had vanished, disappearing like sugar in the pouring rain. Mornings were the worst. Walking into the empty kitchen, the silence screamed louder than any shout. We would look at each other's tired faces, then quickly look away. We were all too scared to say the question choking the air: How long until we lose everything?

Our work was called the Golden Mission, and most money came from Rehan Golden and his family. But when their help faded, when everything felt truly hopeless, when we were right on the edge of giving up... that's when Sudeep would find an envelope.

The money's arrival always started quiet arguments. *"It has to be one of Rehan's fan or well-wisher,"* Kabeer would whisper. *"Who else would care this much?"* But Javed would shake his head. *"No, think. The timing is always perfect. It's someone inside this kitchen, someone who sees when we are*

down to our last bag of rice. They just aren't telling us." The guesses flew around us, a storm of hope and doubt, but the truth stayed a ghost.

Just when every last bit of hope felt like a candle blown out, the help would appear. No one ever saw a face. Never heard a footstep. But every few weeks, when the shelves were bare and our laughter was fake, Sudeep—always Sudeep—would find it: a plain, simple envelope filled with clean, crisp money. It wasn't just money. It was a rope thrown to us while we were drowning.

"Who is he?" we'd whisper, crowding around Sudeep, our hearts pulled between wild hope and crushing doubt.

Sudeep's throat would move, like he was swallowing pain. *"A man,"* he'd murmur, staring at the floor. *"Face hidden. No name."*

He would always pause then, like the words themselves protected something. Then, so softly you could barely hear, he would add with a strange sureness, *"He... knows. He sees the cracks in our walls."* He meant the cracks in our hearts, not just the building.

Once, Mr. Farooq gently took Sudeep aside, his voice kind but urgent. *"Did you see anything, Sudeep? A scar? A limp? Anything at all?"*

But the boy just stared at his worn-out shoes, his jaw set like rock, guarding a secret that felt too heavy to speak.

Tohid, our youngest, once said with pure faith, *"It's an angel! Angels don't need names."* Sudeep never said he was wrong. He would just hold the envelope in his hands like it was a small, hurt bird.

"I ran after him once," Sudeep confessed one grey evening, his voice thin and raw. *"He was just so fast. He turned a corner,*

and by the time I got there, he had melted into the empty lockdown streets. Like he was never there." He always looked right at me when he told this part, a strange light in his eyes. *"I stood there, gasping for air, my legs shaking. But he left something behind. On the ground, right where he vanished, I found a single, cheap candy wrapper—the bright orange kind. The kind like uncle Irshad always kept in his pocket.*

"It was just trash," Sudeep repeated softly, "but it felt... left on purpose. A piece of a ghost."

Javed snorted, kicking at the leg of his chair. *"Enough ghost stories. That wrapper's just trash – any street vendor sells them. Wasting time on this when we should be counting the money."*

That bright orange scrap haunted us all; it was a common thing, the kind any one of us might have carried, yet none could remember having one that day.

In those moments, my hand would fly to my wallet, my fingers finding the faded drawing of my dream school. A cold shock would freeze me, but I'd push it deep down. It felt too close, too much like my own story. Just a coincidence, I'd tell myself, but the look in Sudeep's eyes told me he believed it was more.

We all tried to see him, this man who was our lifeline. We hid. We listened. We watched. It was useless. He was a ghost who came only when our sadness was deepest. Only Sudeep seemed to feel his presence, like a shadow brushing past in the dark.

Even after things got better, Uncle Imran would stare into his tea, lost. *"That boy, Sudeep... he carried more than just envelopes."* Mr. Farooq stopped asking Sudeep questions, but his sad, knowing eyes would often rest on him. *"No stranger gives so much, for so long, for nothing,"* he'd whisper to himself. He then turned to me. *"Faiz, did you never try to find out from him? Sudeep is your best friend."*

I gave a small, helpless smile. *"If all of you couldn't find out, who am I? Nothing."*

"Maybe he is nothing," Mr. Farooq replied with a smile, while Imran just looked at me, his face a mystery I couldn't solve.

The envelopes eventually stopped coming. We stopped asking Sudeep about them. But the question never left. It stayed, a cold stone in our shoe: Who were you?

Maybe some truths are meant to stay buried. Maybe he was no one important to the world. Maybe he was useless and failed. Or maybe he was everyone—living proof that the kindness we thought was dead still breathed in the shadows. But I know this deep in my bones: when the world looked away, when the darkness was closing in, a secret friend kept our small flame alive. His money fed hungry mouths. It bought medicine for the sick. His silence spoke a language all its own.

To the man who left pieces of his heart in our kitchen: thank you. You showed us that true kindness needs no name and wears no face.

Still, the nights are long and full of shadows. I see Sudeep staring into empty corners, his eyes old in his young face. I hear Mr. Farooq's voice, sharp as broken glass, echoing in my mind: *He knows.*

The question we never dare ask hangs thick in the air between us. When Sudeep's eyes meet mine, I see the secret he holds like a stone in his heart—the name he will not speak, the truth he guards. I search his face, desperate for the answer he will not give, and wonder if we will ever truly feel the crushing weight of the truth he carries alone.



The scene is no different at Jehangirabad cemetery. Secretary of the cemetery, Rehan Golden said 9 to 10 bodies have been brought at the graveyard instead of the usual two a day. "It takes around 3-4 hours to dig graves manually. Now, we have had to bring in a JCB," said Golden.

"The existing cemetery is on 3 acres. There are 27 acres available but the rest is hilly area. We have requested the administration to level around 3 acre more," said Rehan.

The Times of India newspaper published an article about the use of JCB machines in Jhada Graveyard during COVID



The Dainik Bhaskar India's top newspaper published an article on the rising number of deceased at Jhada Graveyard, highlighting the need for JCB machines to dig graves and a shortage of soil for filling them.



49. Serving Humanity, Losing Everything: The Slow Suicide of Rehan Golden's Soul"

Days blended into weeks, and weeks stretched into long, agonizing months as the Golden Team worked tirelessly, fighting a relentless enemy—COVID-19. It felt like the world was holding its breath, watching this small team battle an invisible giant. The second wave arrived like a nightmare, more brutal than anyone could have ever imagined. The city of Bhopal was overwhelmed by despair, drowning in a sea of death and fear. But amidst this overwhelming hopelessness, one light refused to flicker out—Rehan Golden. He led his team with unshakable will, a man who refused to break, no matter how heavy the burden became. The efforts of Rehan and his brothers, alongside his team, were nothing short of heroic.

In those dark, harrowing days, it was Rehan and his team who became the last family for countless souls who died alone. When their own loved ones stayed away, too terrified to come close, it was the Golden Team that stepped forward. Their hands trembled, but their hearts remained steady as they performed the final rites for the departed. They ensured dignity for every soul, regardless of faith, never once hesitating in the face of growing danger. Bhopal was losing lives faster than they could be laid to rest. Graves once dug by hand now required JCBs.

The sheer number of deaths was unimaginable. Even with graves prepared in advance, it was never enough. The dead kept coming, and Rehan's team—though battered and worn—carried on with their heartbreaking work.

The government stepped in, with officials like DIG Irshad Wali, IAS Avinash Lavania, MLA Arif Masood, and TI Virendra Chouhan doing everything they could to help. Yet, no amount of outside assistance could compare to the sacrifice made by Rehan Golden, his family, and his team. Rehan led the entire operation with unwavering determination, guiding every effort with strength and clarity. Under his leadership, Amir took charge as the graveyard team leader, and Farooq led the kitchen team—both pushing far beyond their limits to serve the cause. Standing firmly beside Rehan were his brothers—Anwar, Imran, and Irfan—and his nephew Faiz, along with other devoted family members including Aadil, Adnan, Hamza, Arib, Anas, Zeeshan, Zain, and Farhan. Together, they worked day and night, united in tireless service, driven by purpose, and undeterred by exhaustion.

But the cost of their selflessness soon became painfully clear. Rehan's uncle had traveled all the way from Mumbai to lend his support. For a brief moment, it felt like some relief had arrived. But within a month of his arrival, he contracted the deadly virus. He fought hard, but it was a battle he could not win. On April 19, 2021, he passed away, leaving the family shattered. There was no time to mourn, no moment to sit in grief. The crisis was deepening, and they had to keep going.

Not long after, Rehan's brother Anwar Ahmed, who had already been fighting illness, grew weaker. His condition worsened, but Anwar was stubborn, determined to continue helping those in need. **“There's no rest when there's work to be done,”** he would say, brushing off warnings from doctors. He pushed his body beyond its limits. But one day, his body

gave out. He collapsed, struggling to breathe, and was rushed to Avicenna Hospital. Despite the doctors' best efforts, his lungs were too damaged, ravaged by the virus.

The family moved mountains to save him. They spent every rupee they had, buying medicine at outrageous prices—ten, even twenty times the usual cost. When doctors prescribed Remdesivir, the team sourced it from Indore at an astronomical price of 25,000 rupees. Oxygen, the breath of life, was so scarce they had to purchase jumbo cylinders at heavily inflated rates. The doctors at Avicenna Hospital said, **“No hope. We can't help.”** But Anwar's family wouldn't listen. Under the burning April sun, they ran him to Chirayu Hospital, hearts begging for a miracle.

That night, April 23, 2021, machines beeped weakly. Anwar's chest struggled to rise. His children held his cold hands, crying, **“Papa, wake up!”** His wife wiped his face, her tears falling on his skin. **“Stay with us,”** she whispered, her voice breaking. The room felt thick with prayers, fear, and sweat.

Morning came. April 24, 2021. Chirayu Hospital. A flatline screamed. His children collapsed, shaking him, screaming, **“Papa! Papa!”** His wife fell to the floor, screaming, **“Why? Why him?”** until her voice cracked. Their love was strong, but death was stronger. Anwar was gone. His children's laughter died. His wife's smile vanished. Their home felt empty, their hearts ripped open. The April heat still burned—like their pain. Like the day God stopped listening.



Mr. Anwar Ahmed's Heart-Wrenching Farewell in His Last Days at Avicenna Hospital Bhopal.

The loss of Anwar was a crushing blow, especially to Imran, who had already been devastated by the deaths of his elder brother Irshad and his uncle. Imran's grief consumed him, and his eyes were always wet with unshed tears. Yet, despite his heartache, his determination to serve humanity grew stronger. He threw himself into the work—preparing meals, serving in the graveyard, ensuring that every detail was attended to. He neglected his own health, skipping meals and forgetting his medications. One day, his body gave out, and he collapsed, paralyzed by exhaustion.

The death of Anwar tore through the family like a storm, leaving everyone broken, especially their elder sister, Salma. She had already been carrying the weight of their earlier loss, still grieving the death of their fatherly figure, Irshad Ahmed. Anwar's death shattered what little strength she had left. She withdrew from the world, stopped speaking, and ceased engaging with others. It was as if the light in her eyes had gone out. She carried her unbearable grief until October 17, 2022,

when she too passed away, her heart unable to bear the weight of sorrow any longer.

When the world finally breathed again and COVID-19's shadow grew faint, Bhopal danced with joy for its forgotten heroes. Rehan Golden and his Golden Team were hugged by crowds, praised like kings returning from war. Police saluted them, politicians shook their hands, children waved flags with their names. The city's heart beat loud for them—streets roared with cheers, walls wore banners calling them saviors, strangers cried **“thank you”** through trembling lips. For weeks, they lived inside a storm of love, their smiles frozen in camera flashes, their tired hands held up by the gratitude of thousands.

But time eats memories. And oh, how quickly the cheers can fade into silence. Slowly, the claps faded. The banners peeled off the walls, crumpled into trash. People returned to their jobs, their weddings, their laughter. Life swallowed their promises to **“never forget.”** The Golden Team's faces blurred in the crowd. Their sacrifices turned into whispers, then silence. Rehan, once carried on shoulders like a champion, now walked alone.

His family's wounds never closed. They had burned their lives to keep others warm. Brothers, sisters—gone. Their savings bled dry by hospital bills, funeral costs, empty plates. The house they built together now echoed with ghosts. Friends who swore **“we'll stand by you forever”** vanished like smoke. Rehan's phone stopped ringing. His door gathered dust.

Aadil Irshad, who once owned a luxurious restaurant and café, now sells rice and soap in a cramped store. His eyes stay lowered, ashamed of the cracks in his shoes. Mr. Farooq, who once ran a vehicle service station with pride and oily hands, now works in a foreign land, counting the days until he can send money home. Imran and Irfan Ahmed, once laughing

brothers, now bend under debt, their laughter replaced by sleepless nights.

I lost everything too. Every penny I earned from years working abroad, protecting oil and gas refineries in countries that weren't mine—gone. My father's voice, my mother's hugs—gone. My dream? A school with big windows where poor kids could learn for free, where the rich and the ragged would share desks. I drew it on paper once, my pencil fierce with hope. Now that paper is soft and torn, folded and refolded in my pocket like a prayer no one hears.

But Rehan's pain cuts the deepest. His body is breaking—liver rotting, heart trembling, diabetes eating away at his strength. Yet he cannot afford medicine, so he pays with pain. Every evening, he limps to the graveyard, collapsing beside the stones that bear his family's names: Irshad. Anwar. Salma. Father. Tears drip onto the dirt, watering graves instead of dreams. The man who carried a city on his back now whispers to the wind, **“Why did I survive?”**

People see him and look away. They don't want to remember the hero who saved them. To them, he's a ghost now—clothes hanging loose, eyes hollow, as if the virus ate his soul last of all. The city healed, but Rehan's soul stayed bleeding. The city glitters in the distance, busy forgetting. They don't see Aadil's empty eyes as he weighs rice. They don't see Imran swallowing tears along with his pills. They don't see me, blisters on my hands from digging graves, not building schools.

Three years have passed. Three years of empty nights. Three years of rewriting the same words until my hands trembled. Today, I close the book. The cover feels rough, like Rehan Uncle's voice. I know where he is. Always the same place. Rain, storms, heat that chokes—nothing stops him. Every evening, he sits by the graves.

I find him as the sun turns red. His shoulders slump like broken branches. Eyes wet, but no tears fall. **“Rehan Uncle,”** I whisper. He doesn’t look up. The dirt beneath him holds his father, his mother, his brothers, his sister. All gone. **“It’s done,”** I say, clutching the book to my chest. My voice shakes. **“I finished it.”** He turns slowly. His eyes—hard for years—soften. His rough hands touch the cover like it’s alive. **“You... wrote everything?” “Every word,”** I say, my throat tight. **“For you. For our family. For Father.”**

He takes the book. The pages smell like rain and old pain. **“Will they... print it?”** His voice cracks, weak as a dying man’s breath. **“Yes.”** Rain begins to fall. **“The world will know how you sold Auntie’s jewelry to feed hungry children. How you held strangers’ hands as they died. How—”** I stop. The memory chokes me—him in the hospital bed, lungs failing, whispering: **“Did we feed the poor?” “How you stayed strong when we all fell apart. You were our hope. Our hope.”** He touches the faded title: GOLDEN. His laugh sounds like breaking glass. **“Golden? Beta, look at me. I talk to dirt. I’m... nothing.” “No,”** I want to scream. You kept us alive. But I can’t speak. I turn away, tears burning, silence swallowing us.

I pull the drawing from my pocket. The paper is thin, crumbling. My school—dirt yard, cracked chalkboard, barefoot kids sharing desks. I drew it the night Father said, **“This school will be your gift to the world.”** Now the edges are torn, like the dream. **“Take it,”** I say, pushing it into Rehan’s hands. **“Bury it. I can’t bear to see it.”** He unfolds it slowly, like opening a wound. His thumb brushes the faded pencil lines. **“You kept this?” “Yes.”** Wind howls between us. He stares at the drawing. **“Hope lives,”** he whispers. But his face is a tomb.

The job letter in my pocket feels heavy: Corrosion Engineer. Iraq. Fix pipes. Leave soon. Rehan grabs my arm. **“Your**

father—” His voice shatters. **“Before he died... he begged me. ‘Make Faiz build the school. Let me see it... before I go.’”** A sob escapes him. **“But he’s gone. Our family’s gone. And I... I failed.”** The city shines like a fake smile. It ignores Aadil starving, counting grains of rice. It ignores Imran swallowing pills to forget. It ignores Father’s empty chair, still shaped like his body. Rehan falls to his knees, crushing the drawing. **“I promised...”** Moonlight turns graves to skeletons.

I walk away, dust mixing with tears. Rehan stays—a shadow melting into the earth. Somewhere, a kite falls. A child wails. The world spins, uncaring. In my pocket, the crumpled paper screams: You promised. I leave, but Rehan remains. Rehan Golden breathes, but his heart? Buried with the dead. The world spins on, forgetting us. Later, under a bleeding sunset, Rehan still kneels at the graves. Wind carries his words to the stones: **“Forgive me. I couldn’t save you.”** His hands tremble. His chest heaves. The city’s lights blink, ignorant. The ground knows—it swallows his tears and holds his shattered soul.

Will the last grave matter? Or will we all become dust?

In my pocket, the paper whispers. Somewhere, a child giggles. A kite snags on wires. The city spins. And in my pocket, the faded sketch cries—a father’s dying wish, lost in a world too busy to care.

And So, It Ends





Epilogue: THE FIRE YOU CARRY

Do not close this book yet.

Stay here for one more breath. What you hold is not merely paper and ink—it is a life. **Our life.** Now, a piece of it resides within you.

Time steals names. It washes laughter away until only silence remains. Even the bravest stories can fade into whispers. But not this one. Not now.

I was there. I felt trembling hands in mine. I wiped tears that carved paths down cheeks. I watched broken souls rise again—stronger, kinder, more human.

They called us **The Golden Team.** A grand name for ordinary people who refused to let darkness win. When the world shouted, “You’re beaten,” we whispered, “Try again.” When shadows hissed, “You’re alone,” we struck a match.

Two Simple Truths Kept Our Fire Alive

1. Mr. Golden’s roar, shaking fear from our bones:

“Girtey Hein Sheh-Sawaar He Maidan-E-Jung Mein, Woh Tifil Kia Girey Ga Jo Gutno Ke Bal Chalay.”

(“Warriors fall in battle—how can a child crawling on his knees fall?”)

We were that child: weak, afraid, but always crawling forward. Courage isn't having no fear—it's moving one more inch when you have nothing left.

2. Irshad's gentle reminder:

“Allah ke nazdeek sabse azeem farz khidmat e khalq.”

(“To serve others is God's greatest duty.”)

We didn't help for praise. We helped because when someone drowns, you reach—even if your arms shake, even if you might drown too. ***You reach.***

These moments are burned into me:

- **Master ji's** trembling smile when he knew he wasn't forgotten.
- **His wife** hugging us, tears soaking our shirts as she called us her sons.
- **Mr. Golden** turning a street of despair into a river of helping hands.
- **A disabled shopkeeper**, ignored by the world, looking at us with a gratitude that broke my heart.
- **And Rehan...** hearing the doctors say, “It's over,” then planting his feet, staring death in the eye, and roaring, **“NO!”**—forcing it to step back.

For years, I carried these memories like fragile sparks. Sometimes they cut. Sometimes they lit my way. Now, I place them in your hands.

We didn't fight for medals or names in a book. We fought for ***you***. So a stranger might read our story and feel that same spark ignite in their heart.

A Promise—From My Soul to Yours:

Carry this fire.



Carry it when you lift someone who has fallen.



Carry it when you choose hope, even as your heart trembles.



Carry it when you see pain and walk *toward* it, not away.

In that moment, Rehan's courage lives in you. Irshad's love shines through you. *This story becomes your story.*

This is not the end. **It's the beginning.** The spark rests in your soul now—let it grow. Let it burn.

Go. *Love* as if it's the only air you can breathe. Help as if it's the only reason you are here. And when darkness closes in, look up at the night sky and whisper:

“We are still here.”

Because of you, we always will be.



Madhya Pradesh's Beacon of Bravery: Rehan Risks His Life for Humanity – Featured on the Most Reputable Newspaper"



Raj News Network Honors Rehan Golden's Courage

Bhopal – Raj News Network, one of Madhya Pradesh's leading news outlets, recognized the extraordinary bravery of Rehan Golden during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At a time of fear and loss, Rehan and his team stepped forward, ensuring dignity for over 300 COVID-19 victims. With unwavering dedication, they performed last rites for the abandoned, honoring each person's faith—Hindu or Muslim—without hesitation.

"A Duty Beyond Religion"

"I had been conducting last rites for the homeless before the pandemic," Rehan shared. "But when families were too afraid to say goodbye, I knew we had to step in."

With courage and compassion, he and his team worked with authorities to ensure safe and respectful ceremonies. Despite exhaustion and fear, they stood firm, driven by their belief that no soul should be forgotten.



अप्रैल माह के 15 दिन में ही दूट गया पिछले दो साल की मौतों का रिकार्ड

कविरतान में दफन कोविड मृतकों का आकड़ा सी के पार



विशेषांक **राजधानी**
नवम्बर 15, 2021
नवम्बर 15, 2021
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In a heartfelt second-wave interview, Rehan Golden said, “I do not fear death—I will give every soul a proper burial.” Having nearly died in the first wave, he stood firm. A photo of his blistered hands on a shovel shows the grit with which he and his team honored Hindus and Muslims alike when families couldn’t be there.



Honoring Heroes: Supporting Golden Team and the Spirit of Humanity

Several government officials and notable figures played a crucial role in supporting Rehan Golden and his team. While many contributed, we acknowledge a few to express our gratitude and highlight their vital efforts.

Ex-CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan

During the COVID-19 lockdown, then-Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan took swift action to protect Madhya Pradesh.

He enforced a strict lockdown, strengthened healthcare with isolation centers and telemedicine, and ensured food for daily wage workers through relief camps.

Chouhan actively engaged the public, promoting safety and unity. His decisive actions in hotspots like Indore helped control the crisis.

His leadership set a benchmark in crisis management, leaving a lasting impact on the state.



Ex-CM Digvijaya Singh

Digvijaya Singh, a senior leader, also helped people during the pandemic. He gave ₹25 lakh from his special fund to the

Bhopal district government. This money was used to help people affected by the lockdown and COVID-19 patients.

He also started a free food kitchen. This kitchen gave out over 500,000 meals to people during the lockdown. Sadly, it had to close after someone working there got COVID-19.

He knew people were having problems getting help. So, he shared phone numbers for his office. People could call these numbers if they had trouble getting medical care or government support.



DIG Irshad Wali

During the COVID-19 crisis, Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Irshad Wali stood as a pillar of strength for Bhopal. His tireless service, fearless leadership, and deep compassion reassured a city in fear.

Relentless Commitment

Working up to 20 hours a day, he monitored the city, responded to crises, and coordinated with officials. Many nights, he stayed in the police control room, ensuring no call for help went unheard.

A Grateful Team: Thank You, Irshad Sir

For Rehan Golden and the dedicated Golden Team, DIG Irshad Wali was more than just a high ranking official—he was their pillar of support in the darkest times. Whenever we faced a crisis, whenever we needed assistance, he was there. His support was invaluable, and for that, the entire Golden Team, led by Rehan Golden himself, offers their deepest gratitude.

Thank you, Irshad Sir, on behalf of the entire Golden Team, Rehan Golden, and the people of Bhopal.

Your dedication, your courage, and your humanity will forever be remembered as one of the brightest lights in Bhopal's darkest hours.



IAS Avinash Lavania

During the peak of the COVID-19 crisis, District Collector Avinash Lavania emerged as a beacon of hope. His unwavering leadership, bold decisions, and deep compassion helped Bhopal navigate the storm.

Supporting Rehan Golden's Mission

Lavania stood by Rehan Golden and his team, facilitating their humanitarian work, especially in graveyard services, proving his deep commitment to every citizen.

A Legacy of Leadership

His decisive actions and compassion saved lives, leaving a lasting impact. Bhopal remains grateful for his selfless service during its most challenging times.



MLA Arif Masood

In the heart of Bhopal's Central constituency, MLA Arif Masood stood as a symbol of hope during the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis. When fear and uncertainty gripped the city, Masood's unwavering dedication to his community shone through, earning him the respect and gratitude of the people he served.

A Legacy of Compassionate Leadership

Masood's relentless efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic left a lasting impact on Bhopal. His dedication to the marginalized and strong advocacy set a high standard of leadership, inspiring others to serve selflessly. His unwavering support for Rehan Golden and the Golden Team in handling burials at the graveyard earned him the deep gratitude of both the team and the city. *"There were many occasions and events when Mr. Arif Masood stood with the Golden Team, always ready to support and assist us with any problem,"* said a team member. *"He is not just a political leader but also a leader of the people—a champion of the poor and common man, a true hero."* Bhopal remains deeply thankful for Arif Masood's leadership, dedication, and commitment during its most challenging times.



Ex-MLA PC Sharma

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, ex-MLA PC Sharma emerged as a pillar of strength for Bhopal. His tireless dedication and empathy provided much-needed support to the city's most vulnerable, leaving an enduring impact during its darkest days.

A Lasting Legacy

PC Sharma's leadership during the pandemic demonstrated true public service—compassion, courage, and selflessness. His tireless efforts for the vulnerable and his work to support healthcare will be remembered as a **spark in the storm** during one of Bhopal's darkest hours.

Bhopal is deeply grateful to PC Sharma for his unwavering commitment and the strength he brought to the city when it was needed most.



Ex-MAYOR Alok Sharma

During Bhopal's worst COVID-19 surge in April 2021, Alok Sharma helped overwhelmed hospitals by coordinating emergency relief initiatives and supporting healthcare infrastructure. He donated six mortuary vans to handle the high number of deaths and paid all their running costs for six months.

This direct support was vital. It eased the heavy load on medical workers, reduced stress for grieving families, and strengthened the government's response. Sharma's actions showed how local leaders can make a real difference during a crisis.



Memorable Photo Gallery

WIDESPREAD APPRECIATION FOR HEROES HONORING THEIR HEROIC EFFORTS

Golden Team at Police Headquarters, Bhopal



Three heroes in one frame: DIG Irshad Wali on the left, Mr. Rehan Golden on the right, and TI Virendra Singh Chouhan standing in the back.



From left to right: Azeem, Aamir Pathology, Aadil Irshad, DIG Irshad Wali, Aamir Lala, and then Hamza.



DIG Irshad Wali stands with the Graveyard Team



Mr. Rehan Golden stands with the Graveyard Team, proudly holding the Certificates of Excellence awarded by Bhopal Police for their humanitarian efforts.



Aadil Irshad holds the certificate and trophy awarded by Bhopal Police.



Amir, the Graveyard Team leader, receives the certificate and award from DIG Irshad Wali.

**Bhopal honors, celebrates, and appreciates their hero,
Mr. Rehan Golden, as life normalizes after COVID.**



Former MLA PC Sharma appreciates and honors Mr. Rehan Golden for his remarkable humanitarian work during COVID-19.



MLA Arif Masood appreciates and honors Mr. Rehan Golden for his exceptional humanitarian work during COVID-19.



The Ahir Samaj Association appreciates and honors Mr. Rehan Golden for his outstanding humanitarian work during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Mr. Golden receives the Certificate of Achievement for humanitarian work in the graveyard from a representative of the Congress Khel Association.



Mr. Sajid, a renowned advocate, appreciates and honors Mr. Rehan Golden for his humanitarian works.



Aadil Irshad, MLA Arif Masood, and Mr. Rehan Golden.



Aadil Irshad, Masroor, and Faiz







After the pandemic, the craze for the Golden Team was insane. One person even posted Aadil's golden birthday celebration on the back of his auto rickshaw.

OTHER MEMORABLE MOMENTS CAPTURED

Graveyard team





A memorable photo captured us on our way to deliver medicine.

Before Lockdown





After my arrival from the UAE, at Upper Lake, Sudeep left first, followed by me (Faiz), then Saad, and finally Shoaib.



One memorable photo captures Aadil and me with our father, taken just before my trip to the UAE.



After my return from the UAE, a memorable photo captured us all from left to right: Saad, Kabeer, Sudeep, Shoaib, me (Faiz), Mohd Faheem, Fahim, Mairaj, and Salman.