

## Their Wonder Years: Fall 98

### Chapter 61: Operation: Steal Tyrel's Truck (And Maybe His Sanity)

[ 2,414 words ]

The living room at Sarah's house looked like it had been looted by a gang of caffeinated raccoons. Cereal bowls balanced precariously on textbooks, open highlighters bled across midterm study sheets, and three half-used lip balms glistened like tiny abandoned candles on the coffee table altar. The TV flickered silently in the background with reruns of *Boy Meets World*, its earnest white-boy lessons absorbed by no one. A half-eaten bag of Doritos sat open on the floor, crumbs scattered like orange confetti, and someone had left a Discman playing faint TLC on loop until the batteries finally gave out sometime last night. Probably *CrazySexyCool* still spinning "Waterfalls" or "Creep" in the quiet hours before dawn.

In 1998 Atlanta, this kind of glorious mess had become the unofficial headquarters for the entire friend group, and Sarah could not have been happier about it.

She had always been the quiet one in her Georgia Tech classes, the girl who arrived early to lectures and slipped out without drawing attention. Loneliness had been her default for years, a quiet ache that followed her through crowded dorm hallways and late-night library stacks.

Then this chaotic circle of friends had crashed into her life like a poorly parallel-parked car, and suddenly her small off-campus house, a modest two-bedroom rental just a short walk from campus, with creaky hardwood floors and a sagging front porch, had turned into the central hub for Sunday planning sessions, late-night

study groups, and endless debates about Rocky Mountain versus Papa Johns. She loved every second of it: the noise, the overlapping conversations, the way people just showed up unannounced with takeout bags or borrowed notes. She soaked it all in like sunlight after a long winter.

The morning had started early, as it always did now. Sarah and Marisol had rolled out their mats on the living room rug before the sun fully rose, the house still dark and cool except for the soft glow of a single lamp. Sarah was the expert yogi, patient and precise, guiding Marisol through each pose with gentle corrections and steady hands. Marisol showed up every day without fail, eager to deepen her flexibility. For better sex with Bharath, she admitted freely during stretches, aiming for the kind of open hips and fluid spine that would let her move in ways she craved. She envied Sarah's curves and tone:

the smooth strength in her thighs, the gentle swell of her hips from years of consistent practice. In her tiny black shorts and cropped tank, high-cut legs and stretchy fabric clinging to every line, Marisol pushed hard, breathing through the burn with gritted determination.

Bharath watched from the couch, pretending to read but really just staring. When Sarah helped Marisol with an assisted forward fold - palms warm on her lower back, pressing her deeper - he forgot to breathe, eyes wide. The two women caught his expression and dissolved into giggles, the sound light and teasing.

Sarah, still healing and not ready for anything full yet, enjoyed the attention anyway. She liked showing off in the tiny shorts and crop top that hugged her body, liked the way Marisol mirrored her. She liked how Bharath's gaze made heat pool low in her belly without demanding more than she could give.

After the session, they disappeared into the guest bedroom, door cracked as always.

The sounds carried: Marisol's loud moans, the wet rhythm of skin, Bharath's low murmurs of praise.

She didn't join. Not yet.

But she stayed, heat building, the certainty growing that when her heart was ready, it would only be for him.

Sarah still couldn't quite believe that sex could be so good for anyone. Bharath made it look effortless. He played Marisol like an instrument with slow builds, precise touches, knowing exactly when to press harder or pull back until she was begging, voice raw and desperate, body trembling. Marisol would arch and plead for more until the pleasure finally overwhelmed her and she collapsed against him, spent and shaking, little aftershocks rippling through her for long minutes afterward. Sarah loved to watch them. She would sit just outside the cracked door sometimes, knees drawn up, hoodie pulled over her thighs, eyes fixed on the way Bharath's hands moved, the way Marisol's back bowed, the way their bodies locked together in perfect, unhurried rhythm.

Marisol knew Sarah watched. She always knew. And she used it. In the thick of it, when Bharath was deep inside her and moving slow, deliberate, Marisol would murmur against his ear, voice husky: "Remember this morning? When Sarah pressed my hips open in pigeon... imagine her doing that while you're fucking me. Imagine both of us folded like that for you." Bharath would groan, hips stuttering, grip tightening on Marisol's waist as the words hit him. "Or when she helped me in that wide-legged forward fold... legs spread wide, her hands pushing my thighs down... picture Sarah there too, legs wrapped around you while I ride you." The images made him thrust harder, breath ragged, and Marisol would smile wickedly toward the doorway, knowing Sarah heard every word, knowing the heat it stoked in both of them.

Now the house was quiet for a little longer. Marisol had pretty much moved in. her clothes in the spare dresser, her herbal teas on the counter, her laughter filling the rooms at all hours. Bharath stayed over too; they were inseparable, always touching, always hungry for each other. Marisol especially - horny in a bright, unapologetic way that made Sarah smile. Evenings during movies or watching sitcoms together, they both leaned into Bharath on the couch: Marisol's head on his shoulder, Sarah tucked against his other side, legs tangled comfortably. They were fast becoming partners in this strange, warm thing. Marisol and Bharath loud and physical, Sarah quieter but present, included without pressure.

The others still thought Sarah was single, a new friend Marisol and Bharath had brought into the circle. No one knew the layers yet. Tyrel and Ravi had both started finding excuses to sit closer to her during group hangouts, offering her the last slice of pizza or asking her opinion on every little thing with shy, hopeful glances. Sarah found it adorable. Their earnest competition, the way they lit up when she smiled at them. But when her heart was ready, she knew it would only turn toward Bharath.

Sarah was curled up in the armchair under Bharath's hoodie, the fabric soft and carrying his shampoo scent. She pressed her nose to the sleeve once, breathing him in, then let her hand drop.

Camila lounged across the couch like a Roman empress after conquest, one bare foot draped over Jorge's thigh, her toenails gleaming a dangerous shade of crimson. Marisol stood at the kitchen counter, sipping something hot and vaguely herbal from a chipped Georgia Tech mug, observing the scene like a scientist watching primates invent fire.

The fire, in this case, was three boys attempting to make Sunday plans with all the grace of a goat rodeo.

"So let me get this straight," Sarah said slowly, spoon suspended midair over her now-empty cereal bowl. "None of you have a US driver's license?"

The boys looked up in sync, like children caught stealing cookie dough from the fridge.

"I drive," Bharath said, mildly offended, setting down the notebook he had been doodling in.

"Where?" Marisol asked, one eyebrow lifting in that precise way she had when she smelled exaggeration.

"In Chennai," Bharath replied without missing a beat. "My Maruti Esteem has a manual transmission, you know. Power windows, Kenwood speaker system upgraded last year. I once overtook a milk truck while avoiding both a pothole and an auto-rickshaw. Very elite maneuvering. The truck driver actually saluted me afterward."

Jorge groaned and rubbed his temples. “Why do you always bring up auto-rickshaws? Every single time we talk about driving, it’s auto-rickshaws.”

“Because they are the daredevils of the road,” Bharath replied, genuinely wounded. “You cannot understand the art of survival until you have made eye contact with a man going 80 km/h the wrong way while chewing on tobacco and somehow still managing to deliver fresh idlis to three different houses before the traffic light changes.”

“I absolutely agree,” Ravi piped in, nodding fervently from his spot on the floor where he had spread out a Popular Mechanics issue like it was sacred text. “Delhi’s the same. They’re like vehicular ninjas. One time my driver dodged a cow, a scooter, and a wedding procession all in the same intersection without spilling my chai.”

Jorge rolled his eyes so hard it looked painful. “I drove in the Andes, okay? Fog so thick you could cut it with a knife, cliffs with no guardrails, hairpin turns where my tío screamed at me in Quechua the entire way down while goats darted across the road like suicidal Pokémon. I survived that. Multiple times.”

Camila snorted into her hand. “And yet, here you are. In Atlanta. With no license. In a country that literally invented the four-way stop and expects people to actually obey it.”

“I didn’t need one back home!” Jorge snapped, throwing his hands up. “And nobody asked for your commentary, mujer diabólica.”

“Gracias!” she chirped, blowing him a kiss.

Sarah finished scraping the last of her cereal and pointed her spoon like a wand at Ravi. “Ravi?”

Ravi looked up, blinking behind his glasses. “I don’t technically drive, but I fully understand the physics of driving. Torque. Traction. Load distribution. Friction coefficients. I’ve simulated all of it in my mind using graph paper and a scientific calculator. Multiple scenarios. Including rain and night driving.”

Jorge stared at him for a long beat. “Have you ever been in a car with the steering wheel actually in front of you?”

“I’ve sat in the front seat many times while my driver drove me around Delhi,” Ravi said defensively, adjusting his posture with dignity. “I observed closely. With notes.”

Camila cackled and collapsed backward into the couch cushions, wiping actual tears from her eyes. “Oh my god, this is who we’re sending to the DMV? A theoretical physicist, a Chennai street racer, and a mountain goat wrangler?”

“Actually...” Marisol tilted her head thoughtfully, setting her mug down with a soft clink. “Maybe we should send them.”

The room stilled for a moment, the only sound the faint laugh track from the TV.

Bharath sat up straighter from his spot on the floor, his notebook sliding off his stomach and landing with a soft thud. “Wait, you’re serious?”

Sarah smirked, feeling a small thrill at the idea of getting everyone out of the city for once. Away from campus stress, away from the constant hum of midterms. “Why not? We can make weekend plans that actually take us outside Atlanta, right? If you guys pass, we can all pile into something and go to Stone Mountain or maybe even drive up to Helen for that little Bavarian village thing everyone talks about. Fresh air. Actual trees.”

“And then,” Camila added, fluttering her lashes dramatically, “we can rent a van. Something huge. Room for all of us. No more squishing into Tyrel’s truck like it’s a clown car on the way to a party.”

“Free chauffeurs,” Sarah murmured dreamily, already picturing lazy Sunday drives with the windows down and music blasting from a boombox in the back. “Never carry a grocery bag again. Someone else deals with parallel parking at Publix.”

“And you,” Marisol said, poking Jorge’s shoulder with one finger, “can stop trying to bribe Ravi to get you to Waffle House in a taxi at 2 a.m.”

“I don’t bribe him,” Jorge muttered, crossing his arms. “We collaborate. Efficiently. He gets the intellectual stimulation of route optimization; I get hash browns. It’s symbiotic.”

Tyrel strolled into the room shirtless, towel slung over one shoulder, body still glistening from what had clearly been a post-shower flex-off session with the bathroom mirror (he had lost, judging by the slight slump in his shoulders). He squinted at the assembled chaos. “Why do I feel like I just walked into some bullshit?”

All heads turned toward him in perfect unison.

Camila smiled like a politician sealing a deal. “Tyrel, mi amor... can we borrow your truck for a DMV test for Jorge, Bharath, and Ravi?”

“No.”

Sarah leaned forward, elbows on her knees. “Come on. It’s perfect for the driving test. Classic, sturdy. No mystery buttons like in those new Hondas. The horn works. Everyone knows the horn is half the battle in Atlanta traffic.”

“And it smells like pine air freshener and testosterone,” Camila added helpfully.

“No,” Tyrel repeated flatly, crossing his arms over his chest. “That truck is an extension of my soul. I am not lending it to three clueless disasters with poor hand-eye coordination and zero respect for American road rules.”

“But you love us,” Sarah cooed, tilting her head just so. “Especially me, right?”

“I love me,” Tyrel said. “And that truck is me with wheels and a cassette deck that still plays Tupac perfectly.”

Camila glanced at Marisol.

Marisol nodded once, subtle but decisive.

Initiate Phase Two of Operation: Get Tyrel to Lend Them the Truck (name still a work in progress).

Camila sighed, loud and theatrical, placing a hand over her heart. “You know, I just think Sarah would be really impressed by a guy who supports his friends' dreams without hesitation. The kind of guy who steps up when it counts.”

Tyrel narrowed his eyes. “Don’t you bring her into this.”

Sarah leaned in conspiratorially, lowering her voice as if sharing state secrets. “You know... I did mention once that guys who let girls borrow their truck are confident. And sexy. Like, really sexy.”

Tyrel blinked slowly. “You said that?”

“She implied it,” Camila said vaguely, waving a hand.

Marisol sipped her tea with perfect calm. “But hey, if you have to tell her no... we understand. Some men just aren’t ready for that level of trust.”

Tyrel looked like a man betrayed by God, democracy, and the entire concept of the female gaze. He stared at the ceiling for a long moment, then exhaled through his nose like a bull deciding not to charge. “Fine,” he said, slapping the keys onto the coffee table with enough force to make the lip balms jump. “You crash her, I crash you. And I mean that literally. I will find you.”

A cheer erupted. Ravi actually clapped like he had just witnessed a scientific breakthrough. Jorge whooped and pumped a fist. Bharath, solemn as a monk receiving enlightenment, raised his palm in a quiet blessing.

“I call shotgun,” Camila declared immediately.

“Why you again?” Jorge groaned, already reaching for his jacket.

“Because I’m hot,” she replied without hesitation. “And a better navigator than you, NotMapQuest. You still think north is wherever the music is playing loudest.”

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## Chapter 62: Truck Trauma 101: Three Boys vs. One Very Angry Ford

[ 1,526 words ]

Tyrel’s truck sat in the center of the cracked Walmart parking lot like a grumpy old bull-battered, sunburnt, and ready to charge. It was a rust-speckled, dent-riddled ‘78 Ford F-150, painted a color that might’ve once been red but had long since faded into something closer to BBQ trauma. A frayed air freshener shaped like a Georgia peach hung from the rearview mirror like a war medal. The bumper was zip-tied. The tailgate didn’t close. The glove compartment held three unpaid parking tickets, two cassette mixtapes, and one emergency Slim Jim.

It was, as Tyrel described it, “a real man’s truck.”

And it was about to suffer.

The group had taken over a mostly-abandoned corner of the lot, the kind where old carts go to die and teenagers secretly learn to drive. A few faded parking lines struggled under patches of weeds. A dented soda machine blinked sadly in the distance.

Marisol, Sarah, Camila, and Tyrel stood by the curb like a firing squad of spectators. Sarah sipped a 20 oz Mountain Dew. Camila had a camcorder hoisted to her eye like she was filming a war documentary. Tyrel had both hands on his head like he was trying to keep his brain from escaping. Marisol chewed a red Twizzler with the menace of someone who *knew* they were watching a slow-motion disaster.

Inside the truck, Ravi was sweating buckets.

“Why are we doing this again?” Tyrel asked, his voice the low whimper of a man betrayed by every decision he’d ever made.

“Because,” Marisol said, patting his shoulder like a weary coach, “they’re gonna use *this* at the DMV tomorrow, and it’s better they crash now where we can film it.”

“*Crash?*” Tyrel squawked, voice cracking. “You said nothing about crashing!”

Camila leaned around Sarah. “Don’t worry, babe. They’ll only scrape. Gently. Like a kitten trying to murder you.”

Sarah added helpfully, “Think of it as exposure therapy. For you. And your suspension.”

“I should’ve left y’all at home,” Tyrel muttered.

Inside the truck, Ravi sat behind the wheel like it was a NASA control panel. His glasses were fogged. His knees were too high. He couldn’t find the handbrake.

“Where is the-uh-retention lever? The... clutchy-stick?”

“That’s the brake,” Bharath said from the passenger seat, calm as a monk. “The clutch is on the floor. Third pedal.”

“There are *three*? Why are there *three*?! What is this, a foot puzzle?!”

“Welcome to America,” Bharath murmured. “Land of freedom and confusing transmission systems.”

Outside, Camila zoomed the camcorder. “Documenting this for future lawsuits.”

“You’re a menace,” Tyrel hissed. “If my truck dies, you die.”

“Smile for the trauma reel,” Camila cooed.

Ravi finally found the clutch and depressed it. The truck groaned awake like an old man startled from a nap. It coughed. Lurched forward two inches. Then stalled with a mechanical *cough*.

“Ah!” Ravi yelped, hands flying off the wheel.

“You killed it,” Bharath said.

“Vamanos hermano. Don’t leave the clutch so early! You need to feel the vibe before you release the clutch properly,” advised Jorge

“I *startled* it,” Ravi insisted, wide-eyed. “It was not ready for my energy.”

Tyrel looked ready to cry. “He murdered my girl in cold neutral.”

“Take a breath,” Marisol said, sliding sunglasses onto her face. “We haven’t even *started* the chaos yet.”

Ravi took a breath. Started it again. This time, it held.

“Okay. Clutch, gear, gas...”

“Gently,” Bharath warned.

“Si. Con cuidado” said Jorge holding on to the cab

Ravi released the clutch like it insulted his mother or Spock.

The truck lunged forward with the unholy torque of a demon goat. It made a wide, screeching arc, tires protesting in a symphony of fear.

“Ohmygod..ohmygod..ohmygod,” Sarah chanted.

“RAVI TURN!” Marisol yelled.

“I *AM* TURNING!” Ravi screamed back, as the truck performed a deeply unintentional drift around an empty cart corral.

From the curb, Camila whooped. “This is *cinema!*”

Jorge was screaming, “Asi! Vamonos muchachos!”

Ravi slammed the brakes. The truck stopped with a dramatic shudder, exactly three feet from a rusty pole.

“I DID IT!” he screamed, throwing both hands in the air like he’d just won the Monaco Grand Prix.

Tyrel collapsed onto the curb. “He took that corner at *forty*. I *counted*.”

Sarah gently rubbed his shoulder. “Breathe, baby. Let the rage leave your bones.”

Tyrel whimpered. “My bones are *screaming*.”

“Next!” Marisol barked like a drill sergeant. “Let’s go, Desi Speed Racer!”

Bharath exited the passenger side, sauntered to the driver’s seat, and slid in with the smooth confidence of a man who’d once driven a go-kart in reverse.

He adjusted the mirrors. Re-adjusted the seat. Turned the key with reverence.

“I am ready,” he said.

Sarah raised a brow. “You’ve driven a stick before, right?”

“Of course,” Bharath said. “I once navigated a family of four through Perambur rush hour on a Hero Honda with no brakes.”

“I don’t know what that means and that is *not* the same thing,” Tyrel muttered.

“It’s better!” claimed Bharath.

“Drive like it’s America,” Camila warned. “Not Mad Max: Tamil Nadu.”

The truck started. Smoothly.

And then, Bharath made a beautiful left turn... directly onto the wrong side of the lot.

“WRONG SIDE!” Sarah yelled, pointing like she was spotting a meteor.

“I am *strategizing*,” Bharath called back. “Wide arc! Tactical position! I am visualizing *space*!”

“You’re visualizing DEATH,” Tyrel yelled. “Get to the RIGHT!”

“I *am* on the right. That’s why I know I’m right,” Bharath insisted calmly. “It’s just not your right, Right?”

Ravi nodded sagely.

He continued his loop, a perfect mirror of what American driving should look like. His hands were at ten and two. His gear shifts were buttery. He even signaled.

To nobody.

“You’re doing great,” Ravi called encouragingly.

“That was the most boring ride I’ve ever been on,” ridiculed Jorge. “Who are we driving? Your grandmother? Miss Daisy?”

“He’s doing great *on the wrong continent*,” Marisol muttered.

He returned to the original position and parked with a gentle tap of the brake.

Perfect.

Except it was still the left side.

“Your truck has achieved enlightenment,” Bharath said, stepping out.

“You have achieved *illegal maneuvering*,” Tyrel groaned.

“You drove with symmetry,” Camila admitted, lowering her camera. “Which is impressive. And terrifying.”

“I could not see any hydrant threats,” Bharath added.

“Because you *almost kissed it*,” Sarah replied.

Ravi gave him a fist bump. “You’re my hero.”

Then came Jorge.

Jorge jumped out of the cab and toward the driver’s seat like he was about to ride a mechanical bull at a frat party.

“*Witness me!*,” he said, finger guns blazing.

“No,” Tyrel replied instantly. “No, we are not.”

“Too late, mi gente!” Jorge yelled, jumping into the truck with both feet like an action hero who didn’t know the budget was fake.

He didn’t adjust anything. He didn’t even buckle.

He just cranked the engine and cranked the *radio* louder.

Tyrel recognized the reggaeton beat and screamed. “OH HELL NO-TURN THAT DOWN-”

“VÁMONOS MUCHACHOS!” Jorge bellowed, flooring the gas.

The truck *screeched* out like a demon unleashed. The tires squealed. A seagull flew overhead in sheer panic. Jorge spun the wheel and performed a *literal* donut.

“Oh no,” Tyrel muttered. “Why did I say yes to this? Why?”

“Because we manipulated you,” Camila said sweetly. “Now hush.”

Jorge floored the gas and peeled out so hard the tires squealed.

“Oh my god!” Sarah shrieked. “HE’S DRIFTING!”

“I’M GOING TO DIE!” yelled both Bharath and Ravi, holding each other petrified in the truck.

“STOP HIM!” Tyrel roared.

“I CAN’T! I’M FILMING!” Camila shouted, gleefully zooming in.

“JORGE! YOU MANIAC! THAT’S MY MAN WITH YOU IN THE TRUCK!” Marisol screamed.

Jorge did a victory lap around a cart corral and waved at them through the window like he was in a parade. “CALMATE! I GOT THIS BITCHES!”

“You are going to *explode* this truck!” Tyrel screamed, sprinting toward him.

Jorge hit the brake. The truck fishtailed, spun ninety degrees, and came to a stop facing the exact wrong direction-but somehow didn’t hit anything.

Silence.

Camila’s jaw dropped. “He stuck the landing.”

“WORSHIP ME! I AM A *GOD!*” Jorge yelled, leaping out.

“YOU’RE A *MENACE!*” Marisol shrieked, slapping him upside the head.

“I was testing torque under field conditions,” Jorge grinned.

Bharath and Ravi got out of the cab and kissed the ground.

“You were *auditioning for death,*” Sarah added.

Tyrel knelt in the grass, staring at the truck. “She’s hurt. I can feel it. She’s whispering to me.”

Tyrel staggered forward like a man who’d aged a decade in twelve minutes. “You... demon. Black Jesus, save me! You put my girl through *G-forces* dawg. I should have you arrested!”

Sarah had to physically restrain him.

“Let it go, babe. Let it go.”

“I need a priest. I need a *mechanic-priest.*”

“She’s whispering, ‘Get insurance,’” Camila added.

Ravi timidly raised a hand. “So... how’d I do?”

“You drove like a panicked goat with GPS,” Tyrel muttered.

Bharath gave a solemn nod. "But you didn't kill anyone."

Jorge did a spin. "I drove like *the devil*. Without the horns."

"You're all *going to jail*," Tyrel said flatly. "The DMV is going to look at y'all and just *evict* you from the state."

Bharath dusted off his hands. "Well. I think we are prepared."

"You're prepared to die," Tyrel snapped. "Not drive."

Ravi raised a timid hand. "I did manage to... move."

"You *orbit-bounced* off a shopping cart rail," Camila said.

Marisol crossed her arms. "We're going to the DMV with *this*?"

"Yes," Sarah said, too brightly. "Because what could possibly go wrong?"

Tyrel dropped to his knees in the gravel.

"Black Jesus help me! Y'all pray for my truck. And my therapy bill."

Sarah clapped. "This was *perfect*. Now we go tomorrow and let the real circus begin!"

Camila gave the camcorder a final zoom on Tyrel's face.

"Scene one," she whispered. "Pre-trauma. Before the DMV."

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## Chapter 63: The Great American Queue at the DMV

[ 1,516 words ]

The moment they stepped through the sliding glass doors, the entire group went silent.

It was not just the smell. There was something between old carpet glue, coffee that had burned hours ago and turned bitter - the faint metallic tang of crushed hope. It was the aura of the place itself. Dull institutional fluorescence buzzed overhead, casting a sickly

yellow light that made everyone's skin look slightly gray. The grim shuffle of feet on worn linoleum echoed like a funeral march. A toddler sobbed near a broken photo booth, the kind with a faded curtain that hung crooked. An elderly man sat staring into space, his eyes glassy as if he had seen too many numbers called and too few lives changed. Someone coughed in the distance, a dry, rhythmic hack that might as well have been Morse code for despair.

It was a Thursday afternoon in the Atlanta area, and the Georgia Department of Driver Services office radiated one unifying message: You will not leave happy. We guarantee it.

The gang walked in together, squinting under the lights like time travelers who had arrived from a brighter, more merciful dimension. Marisol already clutched her clipboard, pen poised like a weapon. Camila held a pencil the way someone might grip a prison shiv in a bad movie. Sarah cracked her knuckles, a small pop that sounded louder than it should in the heavy air. The boys trailed behind, staring around like they had just entered a dystopian novel they had never agreed to star in.

"Okay," Bharath said slowly. He scanned the linoleum wasteland, the rows of molded plastic chairs bolted to the floor, the ticket dispenser that had run out of paper sometime last decade. "Where is the broker?"

Sarah turned around mid-stride. "The what?"

"The broker," he repeated. "The agent. The fixer. The guy who takes a small fee and magically makes you not stand in line."

Jorge nodded, eyes narrowing the way a mafia don might remember home. "Yeah, the facilitator. The man who knows people."

Ravi leaned in, whispering like they were planning a heist. "You just tell him what you want. He slides your papers under a stack, adds a stamp, and boom - no lines. It is very professional."

Sarah looked at them like they were speaking dolphin. "Guys. This is the Georgia DMV. Not the DMV of Corruption Land."

"Or Bolivian," Camila added. She crossed her arms. "You are not paying your way into a license here."

Bharath blinked. "Wait. So you just stand here? Like a... like a... peasant?"

Camila rolled her eyes. "Yes, Your Majesty. You stand. Like the rest of us."

"But surely," Ravi said. He clutched his folder of documents like a baby blanket. "There is an expedited lane? Priority access? Some velvet rope situation? In India we can get expedited service."

"Expedited?" Camila scoffed. "That is adorable. You think this is Luxury Airways?"

Jorge shook his head, scandalized. "This whole place has no respect. Back in La Paz? My cousin Pablo could send one guy with an envelope, two cigars, and a wink, and we would get ten driver's licenses, a passport, and a license to open a zoo."

"A zoo?" Marisol said.

"He wanted a jaguar. Long story."

Tyrel stared. "You criminals!"

"It is not criminal," Bharath argued. "It is efficient. Time is money."

Ravi nodded enthusiastically. "This system is wasteful. We could be using this time for personal development. Or hookah. Or brunch."

Jorge snapped his fingers. "That is it! We open a premium concierge DMV service. Pay extra, skip the line. License But Luxe™."

"White-glove paperwork service," Bharath added. "We roll out a red carpet. Offer snacks and drinks. Ravi wears a tux. Jorge wears a gold chain. We give you options."

"Five stars in the Yellow Pages," Ravi said. "Every license comes laminated and scented."

Tyrel leaned in. "Y'all are going to die poor."

"I can literally get my driver's license printed on edible chocolate paper in India," Bharath muttered. "This place has clipboards. Clipboards, Tyrel. Like we are in the 1800s."

"Where is the fingerprint scan?" Ravi asked. "Where is the cafe to serve us while we wait for our licenses? Where is the entertainment?"

"There is a vending machine with expired Twinkies," Sarah offered.

Jorge clutched his chest. "We have entered the Stone Age."

"No no," Bharath said gravely. "Even the Stone Age had lines that moved."

Camila gestured toward the front desk, where a woman named Gail sat silently judging everyone from behind bulletproof plexiglass. Gail had a high bun, long nails painted a deep burgundy, and a stare that could split atoms. She typed slowly, each key press deliberate, as if the world owed her patience.

"Y'all want to go ask Gail if she takes bribes?" Camila said.

There was a pause.

Ravi turned to Bharath.

Bharath turned to Jorge.

Jorge cracked his knuckles. "I mean, I could try. Back home I once got a parking permit, a fishing license, and a building permit for a shack I did not own just by sending my uncle's driver to talk to this one guy who had—how you say—connections. I can make a call."

Sarah snorted. "Absolutely not."

"We are helping the economy," Ravi argued. "This is trickle-down bureaucracy."

"Trickle-down yo ass," Tyrel said. "You try slipping a twenty here, and they are going to slap you with community service and a 'sassy' write-up on your permanent record."

"I do not even know what that means," Bharath muttered. "But it sounds like racism."

"Can we focus?" Marisol said. "You are holding up the line."

"Line?" Bharath looked around. "There is no line. There is just human soup."

They turned. The number being served? 32.

Their ticket? 97.

Ravi gasped. "That is like a whole semester of wait time!"

Camila leaned in. "Welcome to America, mi amigo."

"This would never happen in Bolivia," Jorge muttered. "In Bolivia, I could call my cousin right now and he would send a guy named Hector to make a deal no one could refuse."

"Please do not threaten the DMV," Sarah said tiredly.

"No no, not like that. Hector is a good guy. He just has persuasive tone."

"You mean a gun?"

"Tone, Sarah. It is all about tone. Like Joey says 'How you doin' in Friends."

Marisol groaned. "Please. Just fill out your forms like normal people."

Ravi held his clipboard like it was a betrayal. "This is barbaric. Look at this pen. It is chained to the desk. Like a criminal."

"Because people steal them," Camila said.

"Who steals a pen?"

"People at the DMV," Sarah said. "It is where hope goes to die and pens go to vanish."

Jorge leaned back and whispered to Bharath, "I give this place two weeks before we take over."

Bharath nodded solemnly. "Start-up idea number seventy-three: DMV, but for the one percent."

They high-fived. Ravi tried to join and missed.

Tyrel watched all three of them and sighed. "Y'all are not getting licenses. You are getting mugshots."

The wait stretched on. Numbers ticked up slowly, each one announced over a crackling speaker like a death knell. 33. 34. A woman in the row ahead of them had been there since morning, clutching a stack of forms and a half-eaten bag of chips. She muttered to herself about "system errors" and "lost paperwork." The air grew thicker with the scent of desperation and cheap air freshener.

Sarah sank into one of the plastic chairs, knees bouncing. She watched the boys pace like caged animals. Bharath kept checking his watch, as if time might bend to his will. Ravi flipped through his Popular Mechanics magazine for the third time, highlighting the same paragraph about torque. Jorge leaned against a pillar, arms crossed, glaring at the ticket machine like it had personally offended him.

Marisol sat beside Sarah, clipboard balanced on her lap. "They are going to break," she whispered. "Ravi is already calculating escape velocity from this chair."

Sarah smiled despite herself. "They will survive. We all will."

Camila filmed discreetly, the camcorder lens sweeping the room like a documentary filmmaker capturing the fall of civilization. "This is gold," she murmured. "The Great American Queue."

Tyrel paced near the vending machine, hands in his pockets, muttering about how he should have stayed home with his truck. Every few minutes he glanced at Sarah, eyes soft with that hopeful puppy look he had started wearing around her lately. Ravi did the same from his seat, offering her a weak smile whenever their eyes met, as if her approval might make the wait shorter.

The fluorescent lights hummed overhead. The toddler's sobs had turned to hiccups. The elderly man still stared. Gail typed on, unhurried, unimpressed.

Finally, the speaker crackled. "Number 97."

The group froze.

Bharath stood first. "That is us."

Jorge cracked his neck. "Showtime."

Ravi clutched his folder tighter. "We are prepared. Mostly."

Sarah rose, brushing off her jeans. "Let us go get those licenses. Or at least try not to start an international incident."

They walked toward the counter as one unit, a mismatched family ready to face the beast. Gail looked up, expression unchanging.

"Forms," she said.

The boys handed over their packets. Gail scanned them slowly, lips pursed.

"Written tests first," she said. "Then road if you pass. No shortcuts. Sit down and wait for your name."

Jorge opened his mouth.

Gail's eyes flicked to him. "Do not."

He closed it.

The group retreated to the chairs. The wait continued. But now it had purpose. The real circus was about to begin.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## Chapter 64: Charming Miss Gail (Window B)

[ 1,436 words ]

The gang had been at the DMV for over an hour, and the strain was beginning to show in small, telling ways.

Bharath slumped in his molded plastic chair, the Georgia Driver's Handbook open on his lap for the tenth time. He read the same paragraph about right-of-way rules as if it were a cursed scripture that might reveal its secrets if he stared long enough. His fingers traced the lines, lips moving silently, while sweat beaded at his temples despite the overworked air conditioning. Jorge had flipped his own booklet upside down and was pretending to read it in reverse, squinting at the words like a demonic spellbook that required a special incantation. Every few minutes he muttered something in Quechua under his breath, half prayer, half curse. Ravi sat cross-legged on the floor between two chairs, highlighter in hand, marking every instance of the word "yield" in fluorescent yellow. He mumbled to himself about policy contradictions, occasionally pausing to cross-reference a footnote with the back cover, as if the handbook might be hiding a loophole.

Sarah checked her watch for the third time in five minutes. The second hand seemed to move slower here, as if time itself had decided to take a lunch break. "This is cruel and unusual punishment," she said quietly.

Camila let her head fall dramatically into Marisol's lap, dark hair spilling across Marisol's jeans like spilled ink. "We are too hot for this. The lighting alone is a crime against humanity."

"You would think someone would have noticed by now," Sarah muttered. She glanced toward the counter, where Gail continued her slow, methodical typing.

"They always notice," Camila said with quiet confidence. She lifted her head just enough to meet Sarah's eyes. "We just have not deployed yet."

Marisol straightened, brushing a strand of hair from Camila's face. "You are right. We have been sitting here like normies. It is time to unleash the charm offensive."

The four women exchanged a quick look of silent agreement, a spark of mischief that cut through the stale air. They had been patient. They had waited. Now they would try something else.

Sarah went first. She stood, smoothed her shirt, and walked to Window B with all the easy confidence of someone who had talked her way out of trouble before. She leaned

slightly on the counter, offering a bright smile and a flutter of lashes that had worked on professors, baristas, and once even a campus cop.

“Hi there,” she said sweetly. “I was just wondering if there is any way to, you know, expedite the process a little?”

Gail did not look up. Her long burgundy nails continued their rhythmic tap-tap on the keyboard.

Sarah pressed on. “I mean, we have been waiting for a while, and my friends are very cute and very nervous. They are new to all this.”

Still no eye contact. Just the steady click of keys.

“We could fill out some of the forms in advance,” Sarah continued, “or maybe...”

“Is it your turn yet?” Gail asked without lifting her gaze.

“No, I mean...”

“Take a seat,” Gail said. The words were flat, final, delivered with the same tone she might use to read a weather report.

“Oh, I...”

“Now.”

Sarah blinked. “But I am blonde and pretty...”

Gail’s silence was louder than any reply. Sarah slunk back to the group, shoulders rounded like a rejected Disney princess who had just discovered the castle had a no-princesses policy.

Camila was already rising. “Okay. She is not immune to Latina charm. Nobody is.”

She strode to the counter with purpose, leaned one elbow on the ledge, and unleashed a smile with enough wattage to power a small toaster. Her voice dropped into warm Spanglish honey.

“Hola, reina,” she said. “You are looking fierce today.”

Gail did not blink.

Camila leaned closer. “My boys are muy nerviosos. You think we can just move up the process? Just a little bit?”

Gail clicked something on her screen.

Camila stage-whispered, "You and me, we both know these boys ain't got the patience for this."

Gail finally looked up. Her expression was deadpan, unreadable.

"Do I look like I care?"

Camila withered. She backed away slowly, dignity intact but ego slightly bruised.

Marisol stood next. "Okay. Everyone move. I am going full First Daughter of Atlanta."

She approached with perfect posture, hair gleaming under the fluorescents, voice polite and measured.

"Good afternoon, Ma'am," she said. "Is there any possibility we could get an estimate for wait time? My cousin Jorge has a medical issue."

Jorge, from the bench: "I do?"

"Yes," Marisol said without turning. "Your condition. With patience."

Gail exhaled through her nose... a sound that carried the weight of every bad decision she had witnessed that day.

"That is wild," she said flatly. "Take a seat."

Marisol returned to the group, blinking in genuine surprise. "I have never been spoken to like that."

"Me neither," Sarah said, stunned.

"She is immune," Camila whispered.

Tyrel grinned like a man who had just spotted his moment. He stood, adjusted his shirt to show off his biceps, and rolled his shoulders.

"You amateurs," he said. "That there is a Southern woman. She does not care about your fluttering lashes or your little bilingual power stance."

"Oh, and you know what to do?" Sarah challenged, eyebrow raised.

He winked. "Watch and learn, ladies."

Tyrel strolled to the counter with maximum country swagger, voice dripping syrup.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he began. “Gail, ain’t it? You have got the kind of poise that makes this whole room look brighter.”

Gail glanced at him. Silence.

“You from around here?” he continued. “Cause you got that sweet Georgia steel in you. Strong, warm...”

“You done?” she asked.

Tyrel blinked. “I mean, I just figured, woman of your strength, maybe you could help expedite a few forms...”

“I am going to stop you right there, sugar,” Gail said. Her voice was cold as a glacier in January. “This face does not soften for flattery, and this keyboard does not type any faster for compliments. Not even from Denzel or Tyrese. Now take your fake charming ass and sit down before I revoke your existence.”

Tyrel froze.

The room froze.

Even the fluorescent lights seemed to dim a little out of respect.

Tyrel backed away slowly. “Yes, ma’am.”

He sat down with a thud, eyes wide, hands trembling slightly.

“I saw my whole life flash before my eyes,” he whispered.

Ravi patted his shoulder. “You okay, bro?”

“She soul-checked me.”

Jorge, Bharath, and Ravi collapsed into laughter, shoulders shaking as they watched the girls and Tyrel strike out one after another against what Jorge immediately dubbed Fort Gail.

Jorge leaned toward Ravi and Bharath, wiping tears from his eyes. “You know what I am thinking?”

Ravi nodded, still chuckling. “This sort of pain is billable.”

Bharath grinned. “License But Luxe. Add-on tier: DMV negotiation and form-filling concierge.”

“Premium pricing for Gail-level resistance,” Ravi added. “We charge extra for soul-check survivors.”

“Triple charge if someone tries to flirt,” Bharath said. “We pass the trauma surcharge on to the client.”

Jorge opened his booklet again, flipping it right-side up this time. “Alright. Back to Question 17. What does a flashing yellow light mean?”

Ravi and Bharath answered in unison: “We still do not know.”

The laughter died down slowly, replaced by the hum of the lights and the distant coughs. The number on the board ticked to 35. Then 36. The toddler had fallen asleep against his mother’s shoulder. The elderly man had not moved. Gail continued typing, unhurried, eternal.

Sarah leaned back in her chair, arms crossed. “We are going to be here until next Thursday.”

Camila checked her camcorder battery. “Good thing I charged this thing. The footage alone will be worth the wait.”

Marisol glanced at the boys. “They are cracking. Look at Ravi. He is highlighting the same sentence again.”

Jorge flipped another page upside down. “I am starting to think the handbook is written in code. Maybe if I read it backward long enough, it will reveal the secret bribe protocol.”

Bharath sighed. “Or maybe we just wait. Like peasants.”

Tyrel rubbed his face. “Y’all owe me therapy. And a new truck. And maybe a new soul.”

Sarah reached over and squeezed his knee. “We will get through this. And when we do, the first drive is on them. Somewhere with no lines. No clipboards. No Gail.”

Tyrel managed a weak smile. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

The speaker crackled again. “Number 45.”

Still thirty-five numbers to go.

Camila zoomed the camcorder on Gail’s impassive face. “This woman is a legend,” she whispered. “I am titling the documentary ‘Fort Gail: The Unbreakable.’”

Marisol laughed softly. “She would hate that.”

“Exactly.”

The group settled in for the long haul. Books were opened. Highlighters clicked. Whispers about premium concierge services floated between the boys. Sarah watched them all, her chaotic, ridiculous family, and felt a quiet warmth settle in her chest. Even here, under the worst lighting in Atlanta, surrounded by despair and expired Twinkies, they were together.

And that, somehow, made the wait bearable.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## - Chapter 65: The Odyssey Continues: The Written Test

### Chapter 65: The Odyssey Continues: The Written Test

[ 1,494 words ]

The boys were escorted into the Written Test Room by Ms. Jenkins, a woman whose energy screamed mandatory training video and zero bullshit. She wore orthopedic shoes that squeaked faintly on the linoleum, a lanyard with keys that jingled like doom with every step, and a floral top that somehow looked angry with a big red hibiscus flowers printed on navy blue, as if even the fabric resented being here.

“No talking. No phones. No notes. Twenty-five minutes. One shot,” she recited like scripture, voice flat and practiced. She pointed to three cubicles in the back row. “Sit. Begin when the screens say begin. Eyes on your own test.”

Jorge saluted her crisply, two fingers to his brow.

She did not react. Not even a twitch.

Jorge, Ravi, and Bharath filed into the row of identical cubicles, each one a narrow gray box with a scratched touchscreen and a chair that wobbled if you shifted weight too suddenly. The DMV’s blue-gray lighting made everyone look 12% more defeated - skin sallow, eyes sunken. The air smelled faintly of burnt toner and old coffee grounds.

The room was silent except for the low hum of the printer in the corner, the relentless tick of a wall clock that seemed louder than it should be, and the distant mechanical cough of a dying vending machine somewhere down the hall.

“Begin test,” flashed on each of their screens in blocky white letters.

The moment they tapped it, the madness began.

Question 1: When approaching a stop sign, you must...

- A) Stop completely at the line
- B) Slow down and proceed if clear
- C) Honk twice and roll through
- D) Wait for divine intervention

Bharath squinted at the screen. In Chennai you'd stop completely only if traffic was actively suicidal; otherwise you eased through the gap like threading a needle in a storm. He hovered over B, finger trembling, then switched to A. Then back to B. “They want A,” he muttered under his breath. “But I know B is truer in practice.” He finally tapped A, exhaling like he had just betrayed a core principle.

Ravi frowned, pen tapping against his thigh even though he wasn't allowed to write. “Technically the law is A. But in practice B is common. Ethically the law must win.” He selected A, then spent twenty seconds arguing with himself in whispers, shoulders tense. “But what if the sign is faded? Does visibility change liability?”

Jorge clicked C immediately. “You always honk. It is a sign of respect. You announce yourself so the other driver knows you are coming in peace.”

Ms. Jenkins's head snapped up. “Eyes forward, Number 27.”

Jorge gave her a sheepish grin. She did not return it.

Question 2: When a school bus stops with red flashing lights, you must...

- A) Stop and wait
- B) Go around if no kids are visible
- C) Honk and wave
- D) Accelerate dramatically to prove a point

Ravi selected A without hesitation, but then whispered, "Unless it is a four-lane road with a divider... then technically..."

Bharath paused, thumb hovering. "Indian school buses do not stop. The kids jump while moving. But... hmm... this is America." He picked A, sighing as if surrendering to an alien culture.

Jorge clicked C again. "Flash your lights and move. Assert dominance. No one likes a coward who just sits there."

Question 3: What does a flashing yellow light mean?

- A) Proceed with caution
- B) Stop fully
- C) Speed up before it turns red
- D) Try to remember what yellow means

Bharath tapped A, then frowned deeply. "What if they think flashing yellow means yield? That is rude. This is entrapment." He stared at the screen as if it might change its mind.

Ravi picked A, then tried to go back - realizing he could not - and whispered frantically, "What if this is metaphorical? Caution implies context. Does it blink faster at night?"

Jorge chose C without a second thought. "Flash equals go faster. It is like disco rules. The light is telling you the party is starting."

Ms. Jenkins cleared her throat loudly. "Quiet, please."

Jorge muttered, "Sorry, ma'am," but his shoulders were shaking with suppressed laughter.

Question 4: What's the first thing you do when your car begins to skid?

- A) Slam the brakes
- B) Steer in the direction you want to go
- C) Panic and scream
- D) Take your hands off the wheel and pray

Jorge clicked D without hesitation. "Let Jesu take the wheel. Literally."

Ravi whispered to himself, "It is B. Obviously B. Unless we are on a curve. Wait..." He tapped B, then rechecked the question twice more.

Bharath nodded confidently. "Finally, a question with one correct answer. Even in India that is how you do it." He selected B, then looked around and whispered, "Maybe."

Question 5: When can you turn right on red?

- A) Never
- B) Only with a green arrow
- C) After a complete stop and checking for traffic
- D) Only if you are late

Ravi hovered for a full minute, finger trembling. "Georgia laws allow right-on-red unless posted otherwise. But what if the light is malfunctioning? Does the malfunction void the rule?"

Bharath picked C slowly. "Back home we do not even wait for red. But I am adapting. I am in America now. They don't like efficiency." He sounded disappointed.

Jorge selected D and cracked his knuckles. "If you are on time, you are already late. That is driving."

Ms. Jenkins stood up. "Number 27. Eyes on screen."

Jorge saluted again. She sighed and sat back down.

Question 6: You are approaching a four-way stop at the same time as another vehicle. Who goes first?

- A) The driver on the right
- B) You, if you are faster
- C) Whoever looks more confident
- D) Whoever honks louder

Bharath selected A, paused, then whispered, "This seems like a trap."

Ravi picked A, but immediately re-read the question three times, muttering about right-of-way priority in roundabouts back home.

Jorge laughed out loud and clicked D. “Easy. Loudest always wins. Street rules.”

Ms. Jenkins looked up sharply. “Keep it quiet, Number 17.”

“I am 27,” Jorge said.

“Then act like it.”

The waiting room had become a small oasis of normalcy. Sarah had rearranged three chairs into a makeshift recliner, feet up on an empty seat, flipping through a dog-eared People magazine from 1997. Camila was braiding Marisol’s hair in slow, careful sections, humming a Selena song under her breath. Tyrel sat by the window, staring out at the parking lot like a man waiting for news of a loved one in surgery.

“Why did I let him drive my truck?” he muttered. “Why did I let any of these clowns near it? I blame love. I blame women. Black Jesus, save my baby from these savages.”

Marisol glanced up from her braid. “They are just taking the written test.”

“And yet I feel like a part of my bumper just died,” Tyrel said, clutching his heart. “I can hear her crying from here.”

Sarah turned a page. “Wake me when Jorge tries to spell his name in the margin.”

Camila grinned, fingers still moving through Marisol’s hair. “I bet he is drawing flames on the screen. Little cartoon fire around his answers.”

The speaker crackled again. “Number 45.”

Question 10: When driving in heavy rain, what is the safest action?

- A) Use low-beam headlights
- B) Slow down
- C) Increase following distance
- D) All of the above

Bharath grinned for the first time. “Finally. This one is logical.” He tapped D with confidence.

Ravi tapped D, then panicked and whispered, “Wait. What if they want just one option to test nuance? What if ‘all of the above’ is a trick?”

Jorge picked A, leaned back proudly. "You do not slow down. You outdrive the rain. Speed is control."

The screens flashed in unison: "Test Complete. Results will be reviewed after your road exam."

The boys sat frozen for a long moment.

Ravi spoke first, voice small. "I blacked out during question 5."

Jorge puffed out his chest. "I nailed it. DMV speedrun. Easy."

Bharath just exhaled slowly. "It is done. My karma is now in the system."

Ms. Jenkins appeared at the doorway. "Tests submitted. Return to the waiting area. Road examiners will call you when ready."

They stood on shaky legs and shuffled out. The cubicles felt smaller on the way back, the air heavier.

In the waiting room, the girls looked up. Camila stopped braiding. Sarah closed her magazine. Tyrel straightened like a man awaiting a verdict.

Jorge threw his arms wide. "We conquered the written word!"

Ravi looked pale. "I think I failed question 3. And maybe 4. And possibly 1 through 10."

Bharath sat down heavily beside Sarah. "We did what we could."

Sarah squeezed his shoulder. "That is all anyone can ask."

Camila grinned. "So... how many wrong answers do we think Jorge got?"

Jorge clutched his chest. "Betrayal!"

Tyrel groaned. "If any of you pass, I am burning sage in my truck for a week."

Marisol laughed softly. "We will know soon enough."

The speaker crackled again.

"Numbers 97, 98, 99. Report to the road test area."

The room went still.

Sarah stood first. "Here we go."

Jorge cracked his knuckles. "Let us ride into legend."

Ravi whispered, "Or into a ditch."

Bharath met Sarah's eyes for a long moment. "Whatever happens... thank you for being here."

She smiled. "Always."

They walked toward the exit doors as a group, the fluorescent lights buzzing overhead like a swarm of judgmental insects.

The real test was about to begin.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## Chapter 66: From Mortar Shells to Hazard Lights: The Road Tests That Broke (and Fixed) Dean

[ 1,680 words ]

The Atlanta DMV's driving course was a faded loop of cracked asphalt, chipped cones, and potholes that had seen more broken dreams than road salt. The sun hung low over the city, casting long shadows that stretched like omens.

A single battered truck-Tyrel's baby-sat waiting near the testing bay, looking nervous.

Mr. Dean, clipboard in hand, boots polished to a mirror shine, stood stiff and ready. He was 58, built like an ex-brick wall, and had served three tours before deciding retirement meant peace.

He was wrong.

Ravi approached the truck with reverence, clutching the door handle like it might electrocute him. He gave Mr. Dean a nervous smile, his left eye already twitching from self-induced pressure.

"Afternoon, sir. Just so you know, I've simulated this test several times in my mind."

Dean blinked once. "Just start the engine, son."

Ravi climbed in with exaggerated care, as though one wrong move might activate a landmine. He adjusted every mirror twice, checked the handbrake with the methodical precision of a lab technician prepping for surgery, and then whispered to himself, voice low but fast:

“Clutch, brake, neutral, ignition... handbrake... mirrors again, side and rear... breathing in-through nose-out through teeth...”

Dean tilted his head. “Is he... *meditating?*”

The truck coughed to life.

Ravi inched out of the parking space like he was maneuvering a priceless sculpture on a rolling cart.

They approached the first stop sign.

Ravi stopped six feet early.

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Line’s up there.”

“I know. But I didn’t want to risk overshooting the mark.”

“You’re six feet away.”

“Better than six inches past, sir.”

Dean opened his mouth. Closed it.

Ravi advanced. *Stopped again.* Then slowly-painfully slowly-crept to the proper line and stopped again.

“Triple-stop protocol,” Ravi muttered.

Dean clutched his clipboard tighter.

At the yield sign, Ravi came to a full and reverent stop.

Dean sighed. “You don’t have to stop at a yield.”

“I believe in courtesy, sir.”

“You believe in obstructing traffic.”

“There could be... *unseen variables.*”

Dean glanced up. There was no car within 400 feet. A leaf fell on the road.

Ravi pointed at it. "See?"

Dean pinched the bridge of his nose. "Keep going."

Ravi spotted a jogger on the opposite sidewalk. Not crossing. Not even slowing.

Ravi stopped cold.

Dean stared at him. "Why?"

"He's got momentum, sir. It's hard to read intentions at that speed."

Dean blinked. "He's wearing headphones."

Ravi whispered, "Exactly."

The jogger passed.

Ravi inched forward, whispering, "Yield complete."

Dean began writing furiously on the form, muttering what might've been a prayer or a resignation letter.

Mid-turn, Ravi braked halfway through.

"Why?!" Dean barked.

"I felt a bump. Maybe debris."

"It's the road son. It's called a pothole."

"I didn't want to risk tire misalignment."

"It's a test. Not an alignment check. Keep. Driving."

Ravi nodded solemnly. "Yes, sir."

Then he turned on his hazard lights.

Dean looked at him like he'd grown horns.

"You're not *broken down*, son."

"No, but I am in an emotionally elevated risk profile."

By the time they reached the parking section, Dean had visibly aged. Ravi carefully surveyed the lines from outside the truck, then got back in and adjusted the steering wheel by one notch.

His first attempt was wide.

Second was crooked.

Third landed him diagonally across both spaces.

The fourth time, he stopped mid-park and backed out because a bird flew overhead.

Dean stared forward in numb silence.

At last, Ravi lined up perfectly. Dead center.

He cut the engine. Sighed.

“Successful conclusion,” he whispered.

Dean blinked. “That took six minutes.”

“Did it feel longer?”

Dean looked him dead in the eyes. “It felt like *Nam*.”

Ravi beamed. “So... that’s a pass, right?”

Dean’s lips twitched.

“I didn’t hit anything,” Ravi added.

Dean clenched the clipboard. “Son... I am going to tell you something I never thought I’d say outside a combat zone.”

Ravi sat up straight.

“You are a danger not because you’re reckless. Not because you’re uninformed. Not even because you’re confused.”

Ravi frowned.

“You are a danger,” Dean continued, “because you are so cautious you’ve looped back around to unpredictable.”

“That’s... a fascinating psychological framework-”

“No. No frameworks.”

Dean stood up.

“Test failed.”

“But I followed all protocol!”

“You made up your own protocol! *Triple-stopping*?! Hazard lights for a jogger?! I felt safer during mortar shelling in Hanoi!”

Ravi shrank into the seat. “Wow.”

Dean scribbled “FAIL” in all caps and underlined it three times.

Then he walked away, muttering, “I swear to God, the next one better either kill me or save me. I can’t live like this.”

Ravi slowly opened the door and stepped out like a man gently exiting a dream he didn’t want to admit was a nightmare.

From across the parking lot, Jorge yelled, “YO, RAVI! Did you make the truck cry?”

Ravi sighed. “No. But I think I made the examiner cry a little bit..”

Jorge strode toward the truck like he was entering a rap video. Aviators on. Collar popped. Gum in mouth. Swagger dialed to 300%.

Mr. Dean, clipboard freshly replaced and stress veins barely pulsing, looked up at the approaching force of nature.

This one, at least, looked confident. That gave him hope.

Dean nodded curtly. “Jorge Ortega?”

“That’s me, papá.”

“You... look like you’ve driven before.”

“Oh, I have,” Jorge grinned. “You are about to get the ride of your life.”

Dean paused.

“...It’s just a driving test.”

Jorge clapped him on the back. “And this? It’s just Thursday.”

Jorge launched into the truck, spun the keys dramatically, and revved the engine like he was trying to summon the spirits of Detroit.

Dean hadn't even buckled in yet.

"Easy on the-

SQUEAL. The truck leapt forward, tires chirping.

Dean's clipboard slammed into his chest.

"WHY ARE YOU ACCELERATING INTO A CONE COURSE?!"

Jorge grinned, sunglasses still on. "Just setting the tempo!"

"You're supposed to ease into it!"

"This *is* me easing!"

They rounded the first curve. Jorge tapped the horn. Twice.

"Just letting the cones know I'm coming."

Dean dug his fingers into the side handle. "I've... never needed this handle before."

"Okay," Dean breathed, "next up, make a left at the intersection."

"Copy that," Jorge said.

He flipped the turn signal. Wrong way.

"Other signal, son."

"Details, details."

He spun the wheel with one hand like he was drifting through Tokyo. The truck lurched left, clipping a cone with the rear bumper.

Dean physically flinched.

"That cone had a *family*," Dean said.

"It had attitude," Jorge replied.

They pulled into the narrow lane for the classic 3-point turn.

Dean pointed ahead. “Now-calmly-turn in this marked area using a standard three-point maneuver. Signal, check mirrors- Please be gentle!”

“Got it.”

Jorge cranked the wheel fully left, floored it, jumped the curb, reversed blindly, then completed the turn in one insane, screeching arc that left tire marks shaped like a question mark.

Dean just sat there, staring straight ahead, blinking very, very slowly.

“Did I... just ace it?” Jorge asked.

Dean didn’t answer.

He pulled out a granola bar from his pocket and took a shaky bite.

“Last part,” Dean muttered. “Parallel park between the cones.”

“Easy.”

Jorge reversed toward the spot, too fast. Braked late. Overcorrected. Came in at a 45-degree angle, bumped one cone out of place, and hit the curb so hard that the glovebox popped open.

Dean stared into it.

A napkin fluttered out and landed in his lap.

“*Even the glovebox gave up,*” he whispered.

Jorge threw it in park and beamed. “That was exhilarating.”

Dean turned to him.

His voice shook slightly.

“You, son... are the reason seat belts exist.”

“Thank you,” Jorge said, mistaking it for a compliment.

“No,” Dean said, standing up slowly like his knees were made of PTSD. “No, I need to go *walk this off.*”

Jorge hopped out of the truck and threw his hands up like a champion.

“WE OUT HERE. WOooo.”

Dean didn't speak. He just walked across the parking lot and stopped near a light pole. He stood there, very still, watching the breeze.

Camila leaned over to Marisol from the waiting area.

“Is he... praying?”

“No,” Sarah said, “I think he's disassociating.”

Dean finally turned around.

Out loud. To no one in particular. He said:

“I should've stayed in the Corps.”

Then added, almost lovingly:

“It was safer in Iraq.”

Dean stood at the edge of the DMV parking lot, staring at nothing. The breeze stirred the edges of his clipboard. He hadn't written anything in five minutes. Not since Jorge.

Somewhere, faintly, *Living la Vida Loca* still echoed in his soul.

Behind him, a soft voice said, “Sir?”

Dean flinched. Slowly turned.

Bharath stood beside the truck, calm, shoulders relaxed, holding his paperwork neatly in one hand.

“My name is Bharath,” he said with quiet clarity. “I'm ready for my road test.”

Dean studied him, eyes narrowed. “Are you... normal?”

“I believe so.”

“You won't talk about torque ratios?”

“No, sir.”

“You won't honk at squirrels, climb curbs, or do a 3-point turn like it's an Olympic sport?”

“I... don't think so.”

Dean squinted. "Say something reassuring."

Bharath paused. Then said, "I check my mirrors three times before merging."

Dean exhaled. "Get in."

Bharath climbed into the driver's seat and adjusted the seat with a single, precise click. Checked all mirrors. Released the handbrake. Buckled in.

Dean strapped in silently beside him, knees still trembling faintly.

Bharath started the engine. No revving. No flair. Just a clean, competent hum.

He pulled out of the DMV lot like a man driving a sacred artifact. Smooth. Even. Silent.

They approached the first stop sign.

Bharath stopped at the exact line. No drama. No hesitation. Checked both directions twice. Proceeded.

Dean blinked. Scribbled.

"You used your signal," he noted.

"Yes, sir."

"You slowed down before the turn."

"Of course."

"You didn't pray out loud or scream 'YOLO.'"

"I meditate. Not during turns."

Dean made a sound halfway between a sob and a sigh.

"Now make a 3-point turn in that lane."

Bharath signaled.

Turned left slowly. Reversed precisely. Turned again.

Centered in the lane. Parked.

Dean was silent for a long moment.

“You just did a textbook 3-point turn.”

“Thank you.”

“I haven’t seen that since ’86.”

“I practice in empty lots on Sundays.”

Dean wrote *God-tier* on his clipboard and underlined it.

Dean pointed to the cones.

Bharath exhaled softly. “May I adjust the angle slightly?”

Dean nodded, already emotional.

Bharath reversed. Slow. Turned the wheel at the perfect moment. Slid into the parking space with two inches of clearance on either side. Straight. Clean.

Dean stared.

Bharath set the handbrake. Killed the engine. Turned to him.

“I hope that was satisfactory, sir.”

Dean wiped his eyes.

“Son...”

Bharath tensed.

Dean reached out, placed a hand gently on his shoulder.

“You just... healed something in me.”

“Sir?”

Dean’s voice wavered.

“I’ve seen men shoot rifles out of helicopters while upside-down. I’ve seen bombs. I’ve seen bureaucracy. But nothing... *nothing*... compares to the serenity you just brought to my soul.”

Bharath blinked. “I’m glad I could help.”

Dean slowly pulled out the green slip, hands trembling.

“Take this. Take my clipboard. Take my *respect*. You are now... *certified*.”

Bharath accepted the paper reverently.

“I will honor this responsibility.”

Dean stood slowly. Saluted him.

“Go. Be free.”

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## Chapter 67: The DMV Photo That Killed Joy

[ 1,158 words ]

The others watched in stunned silence as Bharath returned with his paper in hand.

Camila whispered, “No way.”

Sarah blinked. “Did... Dean salute him?”

Jorge: “He didn’t salute *me*.”

Marisol: “You *hit a cone* at 30 mph.”

Tyrel leaned over to Ravi. “Did he just get a license by *being normal*?”

Ravi, still wounded, muttered, “Maybe he unlocked the DMV’s *good ending*.”

The boys trudged back into the DMV lobby like soldiers returning from very different wars.

Ravi looked like a man who had been spiritually slapped but was still hopeful. Jorge looked like he was building an inner PowerPoint presentation titled *Why I’m Right and the DMV Is Wrong*. Bharath looked like... a licensed adult.

Behind them, Mr. Dean handed a sealed envelope to Gail, who barely glanced at it before calling them forward.

“Results are ready.”

The girls stood. Tyrel stopped pacing.

Camila rubbed her hands together. “Okay. Time to collect some victories or broken glass.”

Gail opened the envelope. Cleared her throat.

“Ravi: Written test... *barely passed*. Road test... *fail*.”

Ravi’s shoulders sagged.

“I knew it,” he whispered. “The jogger. It was the jogger.”

Camila patted his back. “We love a careful king.”

“I failed without hurting anyone!” he insisted.

“That’s adorable,” Marisol said. “And legally irrelevant.”

“Jorge: Written test... zero percent. Road test... *fail*.”

The entire room paused.

“Wait,” Sarah said, “ZERO?”

Jorge blinked. “*Zero*? That’s not even mathematically possible. Don’t you get 5 marks just for your name?”

“You answered incorrectly to every question,” Gail said flatly. “Even the essay prompt.”

“There was an essay prompt?”

“No. But you still wrote ‘drift or die’ on the table.”

Jorge threw his hands up. “This system is a scam. I drove like a *legend*.”

“You drove like a *possessed blender*,” Dean muttered, walking by with a cup of coffee and a thousand-yard stare.

Camila handed Jorge his results back.

“I made you a trophy,” she whispered. It was just his failure notice with glitter and a gold star that said *Speed Demon* with a kissy face.

“Bharath: Written test... *pass by 1 question*. Road test... *pass*. License: granted.”

Bharath blinked. “Oh. I-really?”

“Yep,” Gail said. “You’re official now.”

Marisol whooped. “Mi amor is street-legal!”

Jorge crossed his arms. “The man panicked over flashing yellow but he gets a license?”

“He didn’t *terrorize* the examiner,” Camila reminded him.

“HE CRIED, CAMILA. I MADE A MARINE CRY.”

Gail pointed them toward the camera station with the energy of someone sentencing a man to purgatory.

“Next step: license photo. And I *swear* to God, if you even *think* about looking joyful, we’ll retake it until your soul gives up.”

Bharath stepped up, neatly tucking his shirt, posture straight. He gave a small, polite smile and squared his shoulders with textbook readiness.

“Uh uh,” Gail snapped, appearing over the divider like a DMV ghost. “Absolutely not.”

He blinked. “I’m... not allowed to smile?”

Gail narrowed her eyes. “This ain’t a Bollywood poster. I want your face like you just found out your grandma left you nothing in the will but debt.”

The photo tech glanced at Gail, then shrugged. “She’s serious. DMV regulations. No joy.”

Bharath carefully dropped the smile, but his eyes still sparkled faintly. Hope glimmered on his cheekbones.

Gail stepped closer.

“Too much light in your eyes. Squint. No-deader.”

He tried again.

“Still too human,” Gail muttered. “Think about... standing in line at the post office for three hours, only to realize you’re at the wrong branch.”

He stared into the void. The twinkle faded.

“Better.”

*CLICK*

The screen blinked: “Image saved.”

Bharath stepped away like a man leaving a confessional booth after being spiritually assaulted.

Jorge squinted at the image. “That’s your license photo?”

“I look like I just got fired by fax.”

Ravi tilted his head. “You look like someone told you all dosas are now illegal.”

Sarah leaned over. “Oh my *God*, you look like you’re about to confess to a murder just to get the interview over with.”

Camila snorted. “No, he looks like a Victorian orphan who just found out he’s allergic to hugs.”

Marisol patted his arm gently. “You’re beautiful. Like a saint in line at the DMV.”

Bharath blinked. “I was just trying to *follow instructions*.”

Gail called from behind the desk. “You did good, sweetheart. That’s the face of a man who knows the American dream is fake.”

The neon lights of the Waffle House buzzed overhead like judgmental angels. Inside, the air smelled like burnt butter, overworked grills, and existential defeat. A jukebox wheezed out a low-fidelity version of *No Scrubs*.

The gang collapsed into the corner booth like survivors of a highly specific war. DMV War.

Tyrel flagged down the waitress-forty-something, stone-faced, tired eyes, name tag: “Rhonda.”

He flashed his signature smile. Or what was left of it after Gail.

“How *you* doin’, Rhonda?” he said, laying it on thick. “I got some extra syrup you could help me spread-”

Rhonda cut him off with a deadpan stare. “I’ve been divorced twice. My alimony just expired. You think you got what it takes to break me *again*?”

Tyrel wilted. "...Ma'am, I apologize for my previous and current behavior."

She grunted. "Respectable. Now what y'all want?"

They placed their orders like people confessing sins.

Sarah: Hash browns scattered, smothered, covered. "I need to feel pain with flavor."

Marisol: Chocolate chip waffle. "This is for the child inside me who just watched her boyfriend die inside."

Camila: Cheese eggs, bacon, toast. "Rebuilding my faith through salt."

Ravi: "Just coffee. I need to reflect."

Jorge: "What's your greasiest dish?"

Rhonda: "The *Ambulance Omelet*."

Jorge: "Perfect. Add hot sauce."

Bharath: "Do you have anything vegetarian?"

Rhonda blinked. "...You want a waffle?"

"Yes, please."

As Rhonda walked off, Tyrel slumped forward. "Y'all... I ain't never been humbled like this. Twice in one day! Even the Wild Stone ain't helpin'"

Sarah patted his shoulder. "It's okay. Gail wasn't rejecting you. She was rejecting *hope itself*."

"That's because she's gonna eat you alive," Marisol muttered. "But, like, lovingly."

Jorge had been quiet until now. Too quiet.

He stared at the window, eyes stormy, fork clenched in hand like a weapon.

"You guys... they *banned* me."

Sarah blinked. "From the DMV?"

"Not just a DMV. All of them. National list. I'm on the wall."

Camila choked on her drink. “What, like a *wanted* poster? That’s HOT mi amor!”. She gave him a passionate kiss but that didn’t mollify him.

“They printed my photo from the security cam,” Jorge said grimly. “It says: ‘Do Not License. Ever.’”

Tyrel snorted. “That’s cold.”

“They’ve declared war on me,” Jorge continued, voice low. “But I will respond. DMV of America... I’m coming for you.”

Ravi looked up, panicked. “Please don’t start a war with a federal agency.”

“I’m starting a *movement*,” Jorge whispered. “Operation: License or Die Trying.”

“You’re going to die trying,” Bharath said sincerely.

Their food arrived like divine intervention. Butter glistened. Cheese melted. Waffles steamed like holy relics.

For one golden moment, the table was filled only with chewing, content sighs, and the clink of forks against dreams.

Jorge stopped plotting revenge.

Tyrel stopped checking if Rhonda was glancing at him. (She wasn’t)

Ravi took actual pleasure in a bite of toast.

Bharath savored his waffle like it was a sacred offering.

Camila leaned back. “You know what’s next?”

“Mid-terms,” Sarah said.

“Mid-terms,” Marisol confirmed.

Zara raised her glass of orange juice. “Let’s make fools of ourselves *with purpose*.”

They all clinked cups, mugs, and syrup packets.

Jorge whispered, “But after mid-terms... the DMV will know my name.”

“No,” everyone said in unison.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## Chapter 68: Couch Catastrophe

[ 1,668 words ]

The clatter of dice, the rustle of fake money, and the escalating screeches of four dangerously competitive college men echoed through Sarah's modest living room like a stock exchange run by raccoons on Red Bull.

"DOUBLE SIXES, BABY!" Ravi roared, launching to his feet like he'd just won the showcase on *The Price is Right*. His tiny top hat token rocketed across the board with the conviction of a man who thought Monopoly was legally binding. "BOARDWALK, HERE I COME!"

"You don't own Boardwalk, hermano," Jorge muttered, chewing aggressively on a Twizzler. "That's my property. Hand over the rent."

Ravi froze mid-celebration. "Wait-what? Since when?"

"Since you were busy telling Camila how Gandhi was basically the first minimalist," Jorge replied, deadpan.

"Ay Dios mío! You're still on about that?" Camila groaned from the couch.

Bharath sighed, massaging his temples. His plan to quietly build an orange monopoly had been completely derailed by Tyrel's economic delusions and Jorge's capitalist vengeance. "I miss playing civilized games like Carrom," he muttered under his breath.

On the other side of the room, the girls were having a very different night.

Sarah lounged across her beloved old brown couch, legs curled beneath her, nursing a Diet Dr Pepper. Camila sat cross-legged, picking lint off her tights, while Marisol was perched upside down, head dangling off the armrest, recounting the drama of her Calculus TA's failed marriage like it was a soap finale.

"...and then she goes, 'I'm not crying over him, I'm crying because my cat died and he never liked her anyway!'" Marisol said, eyes wide.

"Dios," Camila said, shaking her head. "The cat deserved better."

And then, it happened.

CREEEAAAAAK.

Sarah blinked. “Was that—?”

CRACK.

The couch gave a sound like a haunted accordion and pitched violently to the left with the theatrical flair of a dying soap opera villain. One of the legs gave out like a teenager faking an ankle sprain in gym class.

The world tilted.

Sarah shrieked as she slid downward like a sack of laundry, legs flailing in the air. Camila screamed something in Spanish that may have summoned three saints and an exorcist. Marisol, still upside down, did a full somersault and landed on the carpet like a disoriented gymnast who forgot which planet she was on.

“MIERDA!” Camila yelled.

“Oh shit!” Ravi yelped, launching from the game like a Bollywood hero in a climax scene. “Don’t worry! I’m coming, fair Sarah!”

“GET OFF HER, SHE’S FALLING!” Tyrel bellowed, already halfway across the room like he was storming the beaches of Normandy.

“No, *I’m* saving her!” Ravi countered, sprinting with the righteous conviction of someone who had never lifted furniture in his life.

They both dove at the same time-like synchronized idiots.

What followed was less “rescue” and more “chaotic midair collision straight out of *Looney Tunes*.” Their foreheads smacked with the thud of empty coconuts. Tyrel’s elbow nailed Ravi in the ribs. Ravi’s knee went somewhere it legally shouldn’t. And then the combined force of ego, testosterone, and poorly-executed chivalry body-slammed Sarah like she was the last piece of cake at a recovery session for Food Addicts.

Sarah’s air left her lungs like a punched accordion.

“OW. GET OFF. GET OFF!” she screeched, flailing beneath what now resembled a meat sandwich of denim, flannel, and tragic testosterone.

“I’ve got you!” Ravi wheezed, rolling slightly and then somehow elbowing her in the eye.

Tyrel grunted, chest still squashing Sarah’s legs. “Don’t listen to him. You’re safe now.”

“I WASN’T IN DANGER,” Sarah screamed, now kicking furiously. “I WAS SITTING ON A COUCH.”

Bharath stood over them, arms folded, watching the pile of flailing limbs with the calm detachment of someone witnessing karmic justice.

“Should I call 911 or Animal Control?” he asked flatly.

Jorge, still at the Monopoly board, didn’t even look up. “Nobody move. I’m about to build a hotel on Illinois Avenue, and if someone knocks this over, I swear to God I’ll kill all of you.”

Eventually—after more groans, curses, and at least one shouted demand for “personal space!”—Ravi and Tyrel rolled off Sarah like dejected NFL linebackers.

“I got there first,” Ravi muttered, holding up his scuffed elbow like it was a war medal.

Tyrel snorted. “You got there and landed on *my spine*, dawg. She’d be dead if it ain’t for my lightning reflexes.”

“I took a hit to the jaw!” Ravi protested.

“I took a hit to *my soul*,” Sarah snarled, sitting up, hair a disaster zone, shirt half-tucked, fury in her eyes. “My soul and my dignity. All gone.”

Marisol was still giggling upside down on the carpet, one sock flung halfway across the room. “You two really said, ‘Let’s save her... by body-slamming her like Wrestlemania!’”

Camila rubbed her ankle and glared. “This is how *telenovela lawsuits* start.”

And then, as if it had been holding its breath this whole time, the couch let out one final groan—a long, splintering sigh of surrender—and collapsed fully, sinking like the *Titanic* after it hit the third violin solo.

A long silence followed as they all stared at the corpse of the couch.

Then Sarah stood, brushing dust from her jeans, her voice calm. Too calm.

“Well,” she said. “This one lasted longer than my high school boyfriend.”

She turned to the room like a general at the start of a doomed campaign.

“Who wants to go curb hunting?”

“Wait. Hold up. Curb hunting? Like looking for things on the curb? Like peasants?” Jorge said, blinking like she’d just suggested they go pan for gold in a sewer.

Sarah nodded solemnly, brushing couch fluff off her jeans. "Yeah. People throw out furniture all the time. Perfectly good stuff. You just drive around the neighborhood, look for what's been put out by the curb, and-boom. Free couch."

"FREE?!" Tyrel grinned, eyes lighting up like a kid hearing Santa was real again. "Let's GOOOO. We got a truck, we got muscles-hell, we got destiny!"

"Girl, I'm in," Marisol chimed, already tying her curls up in a scrunchie. "This is the best part of the semester. Like a treasure hunt, but with tetanus."

"Are you people hearing yourselves?" Camila stood frozen, looking at them like they'd announced plans to join a cult. "That's not a treasure hunt. That's a biohazard safari."

"You Americans really do this?" Bharath asked, scandalized. He glanced at the ruined couch, then back at Sarah. "You pick up garbage... sit on it... and invite people over to admire it?"

Sarah shrugged. "It's not garbage. It's pre-loved."

"Pre-loved by what, raccoons?" Ravi muttered, still rubbing his elbow from the heroic tackle gone wrong. "You all mocked me for buying discount razors. But this? This is what you do instead of fixing things?"

Jorge pointed to the collapsed couch leg, still half-attached. "In Bolivia, my uncle would've fixed that with a spoon, duct tape, and two prayers to San Martín."

Tyrel scoffed. "Y'all just don't get it. This is America. We throw things out before they're broke. That's called freedom."

Bharath blinked. "That's called insanity. Where I'm from, a broken fan becomes a lamp. A cracked table becomes a bookshelf. A dead television becomes a shoe rack!"

Marisol cackled. "Okay, but do any of those things have cup holders or reclining backs? Because this couch did. Briefly."

Camila shook her head, stepping away from the group like their bad financial decisions might be contagious. "This feels like something my abuela warned me about. 'Mija, don't sit on strange furniture. That's how you get haunted.'"

Sarah rolled her eyes. "You people act like I said I eat floor crumbs."

"You just admitted your couch came from the streets!" Ravi cried. "Do you even know who owned this stuff before you?"

"Does it matter?" Sarah shot back. "It's functional! And cheap! Besides, everything in this house is second-hand-TV stand, bookshelf, even the toaster."

“The toaster?!” Bharath nearly gagged. “What if it has memories?! What if it misses someone else's bread?!”

“Bhai,” Ravi muttered, rubbing his arms, “I can feel the fleas crawling up my ancestry.”

Tyrel clapped his hands. “Y’all are soft. It’s 9 AM on a Saturday. That’s curb hunting prime time, baby. Friday night is when folks get dumped, evicted, or upgraded. That’s when the real treasures hit the pavement.”

Bharath looked genuinely unwell. “You have... *a schedule* for this? Like it’s a sport?!”

Tyrel grinned wide. “Damn right. Couchball. It’s real, baby. Only in the USA. U! S! A! U! S! A!”

Without warning, the Americans snapped into formation like sleeper agents triggered by patriotism.

“USA! USA! USA!”

Jorge flinched so hard he dropped his Twizzler. Ravi stared like he was witnessing a cult summit. Bharath backed up a step. “Why are you chanting?! Why are you all chanting?!”

The chant kept going. Louder. Weirder. Marisol was clapping her hands like a drum. Sarah had climbed onto the broken couch leg like it was a podium. Camila had one hand over her heart and the other in the air like she was swearing into office.

“USA! USA! USA!”

Nobody wanted to be the first to stop. It became a test of national endurance. A showdown of vocal stamina. *A patriotic standoff.*

Finally, they ran out of steam, gasping and wheezing.

“Are you done?” Bharath asked, eyes wide. “Was that... a ritual?”

Tyrel, still panting, beamed. “That was foreplay dawg. Now lesgo find us some freedom furniture.”

Sarah turned, grabbing her jacket. “We’re taking Tyrel’s truck. Let’s find me a new couch, boys.”

“I am not sitting in the back of a vehicle filled with dumpster upholstery,” Camila said, arms crossed.

Marisol tossed her a can of body spray. “That’s why God invented Bath & Body Works.”

Ravi crossed himself dramatically. “If I die from couch cooties, I want it in writing that I was against this.”

“You’re coming,” Sarah said, dragging him by the sleeve. “I might need someone to fight off raccoons.”

“Why me?!”

“You said you do martial arts!”

“Taekwondo videos on VHS! That’s not the same!”

Jorge grabbed a bag of Cheetos. “Screw it. If I’m going to die tonight, I’m doing it with flavor.”

Bharath groaned, already following them toward the door. “This country makes no sense. None at all.”

Camila looked at the sky as if searching for divine intervention, then muttered, “God help me. We are actually going to search for thrash,” and followed.

And with that, the team assembled like the most dysfunctional furniture rescue unit in Atlanta-seven college students, one busted couch, and absolutely zero good ideas.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## Chapter 69: Shotgun Treason and The Great Rat Exodus

[ 2,405 words ]

Tyrel’s rust bucket of a truck wheezed into Sarah’s driveway like it had been dragged up from the underworld and bribed with gas money to return. The engine gave two emphatic backfires - BANG! BANG! - and then sputtered into a low, suspicious growl, like it was reluctantly agreeing to survive one more night.

But no one paid attention to the truck.

Because Sarah got into the front seat. Without calling shotgun.

And Tyrel didn’t just let her-he opened the door for her.

With a flourish.

Like a valet. Like a prince. Like a traitor to the Brotherhood of Front Seat Democracy.

The universe hiccupped. Somewhere, a bald eagle wept.

Ravi's mouth dropped open. Jorge actually dropped his bag of Flamin' Hot Cheetos. Bharath and Marisol clutched each other hard while Camila squealed.

"You... you just let her take shotgun?" Ravi croaked, staggering forward like a man who had seen the foundations of his religion crumble.

Tyrel shrugged like it was nothing. "Yeah, man. She needs leg room."

"Leg room?!" Ravi repeated, voice rising several octaves. "You've told us for months that shotgun is sacred! That it's first-come, first-served, and if your mama didn't birth you in the passenger seat, you don't ride in it!"

"You called it the 'Seat of Honor,'" Bharath added helpfully, like a witness giving testimony in a courtroom drama.

Tyrel adjusted his cap. "Exceptions can be made."

"Since when?" Marisol demanded, narrowing her eyes like a bloodhound catching a scent.

"Since right now," Tyrel said, slipping into the driver's seat like he hadn't just committed cultural treason.

Sarah giggled and buckled in, completely oblivious to the civil war unraveling behind her.

Ravi staggered back a step, arms flailing. "This is tyranny. This is betrayal. This is..."

"A man trying to get laid," Jorge deadpanned.

Ravi's eyes narrowed. "Fine. FINE. I'm sitting in the truck bed in protest. Let it be known I am taking a moral stand."

"Stand fast, soldier," Bharath said solemnly, clapping a hand on his shoulder.

"Honor requires sacrifice, bhai," Ravi said, glaring dramatically at the front seat. "Even if my spine doesn't survive the ride."

"Are you sure you want to sit back here?" Bharath asked, eyeing the splintered plywood, a rusty toolbox, and a crate labeled 'Random Shit: Do Not Open.'

Ravi nodded. "Let the wind carry my broken spirit."

"Let the bumps carry your spleen," Jorge muttered, settling beside him with a sigh.

Then-click.

Sarah leaned forward and pushed in a cassette with the loving care of someone about to summon the dead.

"Ohh," she said brightly. "I brought my favorite tape. Tyrel, I hope you don't mind. It's Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness!"

Before anyone could respond, the cabin filled with the soft, existential despair of The Smashing Pumpkins.

*/ The world is a vampire... /Sent to drain - eeyayeyeye... /*

Tyrel nodded along like he was attending church.

Back in the truck bed, Ravi sat up like he'd just been slapped by God. "WHAT. IS. HAPPENING. RIGHT NOW."

Jorge leaned forward and shouted over the wind, "Didn't you say last week that Billy Corgan's voice made you want to rip your eardrums out with a fork?!"

Tyrel, completely unbothered, drummed the steering wheel in time with the beat. "He's grown on me."

"YOU SAID YOU'D RATHER LISTEN TO A BAGPIPE ON FIRE."

Tyrel tilted his head thoughtfully. "He's got layers, man."

Camila turned from the front passenger floor where she was crouched among snack wrappers. "You told me Smashing Pumpkins sounded like depressed fruit."

Marisol leaned forward from the middle of the back seat, arms crossed. "You threw my favorite mix tape out the window last month. We were on I-75."

Tyrel shrugged. "That was different. Different context."

"You screamed, 'I choose life!' and chucked it out the window!" Marisol cried.

Sarah was already air-drumming with unbothered glee, her curls bouncing in time with every melancholic beat.

Back in the truck bed, Ravi slowly pulled his hoodie up over his head like a shroud.

“I’ve been betrayed by every system I believed in,” he muttered. “By seat assignments. By music preferences. By the very fabric of manhood.”

Bharath nodded. “This is worse than the time you found out Kool-Aid isn’t actually juice.”

“Worse,” Ravi whispered. “This is emotional Kool-Aid.”

Jorge patted his shoulder solemnly. “We ride in silence now. Not because we want to. But because we must.”

And the truck rumbled off into the twilight, carrying with it one extremely pleased Sarah, one extremely two-faced Tyrel, and five bitter souls who knew exactly what betrayal smelled like.

(It smelled like mildew, melted plastic, and Corgan’s vocal range.)

They cruised slowly through the sleepy residential blocks, Tyrel’s truck rattling like a dying shopping cart filled with bricks and unresolved trauma. The suspension squeaked on every bump like it was begging for retirement benefits.

“Couch at two o’clock!” Camila pointed dramatically like they were spotting enemy artillery.

They screeched to a halt in front of a sagging floral monstrosity that looked like it had been upholstered in grandma’s curtains and despair. One armrest had collapsed inwards like it had lost the will to go on.

Sarah squinted. “That thing’s seen things.”

Camila crossed herself. “That thing has absorbed things.”

“Nope,” Sarah said flatly. “Looks like it belonged to a cat lady in mourning and was last Febreezed during the Bush Sr. administration.”

They moved on.

A few blocks later: another find. A leather couch with visible duct tape crisscrossed like a hostage ransom note. There were suspicious brown smears on one cushion, and a sharpie inscription on the backrest that read “DO NOT TRUST KEVIN.”

“Looks like it’s been through three divorces and a bar fight,” Jorge noted.

“And lost both,” Marisol added, recoiling.

Bharath peered closer. “Is that... a bullet hole?”

Camila backed away. “Nope. I refuse to be spiritually hexed by crime scene furniture.”

“Pass,” Marisol declared.

Then-**finally**-they saw it.

Sitting on the curb in front of a house with a smug little “For Sale” sign and a lawn so green it looked Photoshopped, there it was: a **tan three-seater couch**. The couch. The mythical creature. The promised land of curb furniture.

It looked... good.

No visible stains. No duct tape. No claw marks. No cryptic messages written in Sharpie. It had actual symmetry. And dignity.

Tyrel’s eyes gleamed like he’d found the Holy Grail in a layaway bin.

“That one’s perfect,” he breathed, already rolling his shoulders like a linebacker.

“Clean lines, decent color,” Sarah said approvingly. “Minimal floral violence.”

“No exposed stuffing,” Camila added. “That’s rare.”

Ravi squinted. “Are we sure this isn’t a trap?”

“I knew it!” Tyrel said suddenly, smacking the truck door as he jumped out. “That’s the one. I called it!”

“Excuse me?” Ravi slid down from the truck bed like a scandalized lemur. “You called it?”

Tyrel was already jogging toward the couch like he was about to propose. “I spotted it.”

“You spotted it after I said ‘oh!’” Ravi yelled, racing after him.

“You said ‘oh!’ because you dropped your notebook, you illiterate mango!”

“It still counts!” Ravi barked, now elbowing his way to the side of the couch. “Possession is nine-tenths of the law!”

“That’s not how furniture works!”

Camila groaned. “Are they really fighting over a trash couch?”

“They fought over microwave popcorn last week,” Jorge said. “This is an upgrade.”

Now fully engaged in battle, Ravi and Tyrel each took a side of the couch and crouched into a squat like they were about to deadlift Thor's hammer.

"Jorge!" Tyrel called out. "Come help me lift this. Let Ravi just watch."

"Oh, no, no, no," Ravi snapped. "Bharath! Bhai! Come here. We're lifting this like gentlemen. Don't let this clown take the glory."

Jorge raised an eyebrow. "So I'm just a prop in your testosterone ballet?"

Bharath looked up from adjusting his flip-flops. "Absolutely not. I've seen this movie. The furniture falls, the spirits escape, and the brown guy dies first."

"Camila," Marisol said, nudging her, "this is better than Sábado Gigante."

Sarah was still standing near the truck, arms crossed, lips pursed. "You guys... you realize I just need the couch on the truck, right? Not emotional closure."

But Ravi and Tyrel were too deep. Muscles flexing. Sweat forming. Each one stealing glances at Sarah like she was the final judge on American Couch Idol.

"This is for you," Ravi grunted.

"I would literally fight a bear for your lumbar support," Tyrel growled.

"Just LIFT THE COUCH," Sarah shouted.

They crouched, braced, and on the count of something unspoken, hoisted.

Victory was at hand.

And then-

**A blur. A chirp. Then chaos.**

From beneath the couch exploded a **horrifying, furry exodus**-at least six rodents in various shades of grey, brown, and hell no. They scattered in every direction like cursed Pokémon.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!"

"OH MY GOD, I SAW A TAIL!"

"IT LOOKED ME IN THE EYE! IT LOOKED INTO MY SOUL!"

"WHY DOES THAT ONE HAVE EYEBROWS?!"

Tyrel flung his side of the couch into the air like a man possessed and launched backward into the nearest bush with all the grace of a falling vending machine. Ravi tried to pirouette away but tripped on a clump of grass and landed face-first in a pile of damp mulch with a high-pitched grunt that defied known decibel ranges.

Sarah dropped to her knees laughing. "That was majestic. Tyrel - did you have to squeal?"

"I was alerting the herd!" he shouted from the bush.

Camila grabbed Marisol like a soap opera starlet. "Did one touch me? I think I'm pregnant with disease!"

Jorge stood frozen. "We've been marked. They'll come for us at night. We need garlic and holy water!"

"They're not vampires Jorge! They're just rats... I think," protested Bharath weakly.

Marisol held up her Capri Sun like a toast. "To the great Couch Battle of '98. May it live forever in shame."

Bharath shook his head solemnly. "This is why we don't use used couches in India. Either fix your existing one - or burn it to the ground."

They regrouped a few feet away, eyes still twitching, breaths heavy. Behind them, the couch sat innocently, the rodent kingdom now ruling from its floral throne still chirping angrily at the intruders that dared disturb their abode.

"Y'all," Sarah gasped between laughs, "we almost died."

"I think my soul left my body," Ravi said, brushing debris from his hoodie. "It hovered above me and said, 'Told you so.'"

"I peed a little," Tyrel admitted, brushing leaves off his shirt. "Just a little."

As the laughter died down, a quiet settled in.

The couch sat there. Seemingly perfect. Just minutes ago, it had been a beacon of hope. Now it looked like a cursed relic from an Indiana Jones movie.

They stood in a loose circle, ten feet away from the couch like it might still lunge.

Everyone was catching their breath. Ravi was muttering what sounded like a Sanskrit protection chant under his breath. Tyrel was trying to pull a pine cone out of his sock. Marisol was sipping from a Capri Sun like it was moonshine.

And then-Bharath broke the silence.

“Why,” he asked slowly, “do Americans throw away things that can be fixed?”

Everyone blinked.

Camila let out a laugh-snort. “Because we’re addicted to new. We don’t fix. We upgrade. If it breaks, we toss it. If it scratches, we scream and run. If it squeaks, we declare it haunted and burn sage.”

“We don’t repair,” Marisol added. “We replace. Like shoes. Phones. Roommates.”

“Boyfriends,” Sarah muttered under her breath.

Tyrel coughed loudly from the bush. “That’s... not personal, right?”

Ravi looked around like he’d stumbled into a dystopia. “Back home, if a chair broke, we glued it. If it broke again, we nailed it. If it broke again, we got one made - if our grandpa approved the budget for a wasteful expense like a new couch.”

“Only if we literally couldn’t sit did we buy a new one,” Bharath said. “And even then, we felt guilty.”

Jorge chimed in, solemn. “My abuela’s sister had the same refrigerator for forty years. When she died, the priest used it as a podium at the funeral.”

“That’s beautiful,” Bharath said quietly.

“Also it still worked,” Jorge added. “Just made this hummmmm sound that kept demons away.”

Sarah shrugged, slightly defensive. “It’s just easier, okay? Everything’s mass produced now. Like, why pay some dude named Dale to fix your couch for \$80 when you can just get one from Wal-Mart for \$59.99 and it comes with cup holders?”

“And wheels,” Camila added. “And a built-in fridge.”

Bharath frowned. “But isn’t that... bad for labor here? I mean, you’re outsourcing everything. Doesn’t that mean fewer jobs?”

“Ohhh, here we go,” Tyrel mumbled, brushing leaves off his hoodie. “The Great Globalization Speech. China can never be a danger to the US of A. They’re just good at Kung-fu and stuff. Not real things.”

“But he’s not wrong!” Jorge jumped in. “My cousin worked at a furniture shop. Now they just import everything from China and slap an American flag on it to increase the price.”

Camila waved her hand dismissively. “Look, look, look. We’re in college. We can barely afford textbooks and bagels. If someone in China wants to make my couch for half the price, bless them.”

“Yeah,” Sarah added, nodding. “They get jobs, we get cheap futons. Everyone wins. That’s capitalism, baby!”

“But...” Bharath looked horrified. “What if one day China controls all manufacturing?”

The group burst out laughing.

“Dude, chill,” Ravi said. “This isn’t a Bond movie. It’s furniture.”

“Yeah,” Tyrel grinned. “As long as I can get a TV for under \$200 and a microwave that sings when it finishes, I don’t care if it’s built by robots in a cave.”

“Besides,” Camila said, gesturing to the cursed couch. “Why would we fix things? We’re trained from birth to want shiny new stuff. I had an uncle who threw out a perfectly good blender because it didn’t match his new kitchen tiles.”

Sarah nodded. “It’s not even wasteful anymore. It’s a lifestyle. We call it ‘aesthetic curation.’”

Ravi’s mouth dropped. “He threw out a blender for the tiles?!”

Camila pointed to her earrings. “These were made in Taiwan. My shoes? Thailand. My planner? Korea. I’m a walking trade agreement.”

Bharath blinked. “You guys are like the G-8 summit. In human form.”

“And proud of it,” Camila said with a wink. “Call it the globalization glow-up.”

Sarah looked back at the now-haunted couch, solemn. “It’s not just furniture, huh?”

“Of course not,” Marisol said. “We throw away people the same way.”

“No,” Bharath said, voice quiet, eyes distant. “It’s a metaphor. A metaphor for your entire dating culture.”

Everyone turned.

Sarah blinked. “What?”

“You run through people like you do with sofas,” Bharath continued. “No repairs. Just rejection. ‘Oh, there’s a scratch? Toss it. There’s a rat? Toss it. There’s... a past? Toss it.’”

Tyrel slowly raised his hand from the bush. “Okay but that rat bit me. I feel like that’s a valid dealbreaker.”

“Still a metaphor,” Bharath muttered.

Jorge shook his head. “Too deep, man. Go back to yelling about ghosts.”

Ravi stared up at the clouds. “Somewhere out there... is a couch that doesn’t want to kill me. And I will find her. Preferably new. With warranty.”

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## Chapter 70: Serial Killer Digest Special: Our \$20 Couch Almost Cost Us Our Kidneys

[ 2,167 words ]

Back at Sarah’s house, the group trickled in like shell-shocked soldiers returning from battle. The living room still looked like a crime scene: the collapsed couch lay like a corpse nobody had bothered to cover, surrounded by snack wrappers, textbooks, and Ravi’s crushed sense of dignity.

Sarah sighed and plopped down onto the floor with the grace of someone who had emotionally checked out around Couch #3.

“I’m not buying a new one,” she declared.

Camila stared at her like she’d grown a second head. “Still? After the rats?”

“It goes against college culture,” Sarah said stubbornly. “A brand-new couch would feel... fake. Like putting a diamond ring on a troll doll. This house is all second-hand. A new couch would ruin the vibe.”

“The vibe?” Ravi said, eyes wide. “The vibe is mildew, and emotional damage!”

“It’s authenticity!” Sarah argued. “College is supposed to be grimy. That’s how you know it’s real. I don’t want to be called a faker by someone.”

“But they would need to care enough to come into your house first,” protested Bharath

“Still. I would know.”

“She right dawg... you don’t wanna be known as a faker,” opined Tyrel sagely.

“Okay, so then what?” Marisol asked, flopping onto a beanbag. “Back to curbside roulette?”

Tyrel grinned. “Nope. Time to embrace the future, baby. Craigslist.”

Bharath frowned. “That sounds like a scam. Why does Craig get to make the list?”

“Anyone can add to the list. Stop clown’ fool,” said Tyrel rolling his eyes.

“Yea, but it’s still called Craig’s list. Why not call it everyone’s list,” protested Bharath stubbornly.

“It is a scam,” Ravi said flatly. “A digital flea market where murderers sell cursed furniture for gas money.”

“Craigslist is the peak of American innovation,” Tyrel declared proudly. “It’s the internet, but sketchy. Like God intended.”

“You can’t even tell if people are legit,” Jorge added. “How do you know they’re not lying?”

Tyrel shrugged. “You just trust your gut.”

“In Bolivia,” Jorge said, “we verify everything through the abuela network first. Want to rent a house? Call someone’s grandma. Want to date someone? Grandma. Want to buy furniture? Three grandmas minimum. Cross-checked. Triple stamped.”

“And here?” Ravi gestured at the glowing CRT monitor hooked to Sarah’s bulky desktop tower. “You just email some random ‘JDog420’ and hope they don’t own a basement with chains in it?”

“That’s part of the charm,” Sarah said brightly, already typing. “Danger adds flavor.”

“Flavor?!” Bharath squeaked.

After a few minutes of browsing blurry JPEGs and descriptions that ranged from “lightly used” to “only one suspicious stain,” they found it.

*“Couch - \$20 - must pick up today. Great condition. No weird smells.”*

“‘No weird smells’ is a red flag,” Camila muttered. “It means it smells weird.”

“Too late,” Sarah said, grabbing her jacket. “We’re going.”

The house stood at the end of a crooked cul-de-sac, hunched beneath a canopy of overgrown trees like it was trying to hide from the zoning department. The siding was a shade of pale despair, the porch creaked audibly as the truck approached, and the mailbox leaned at a suspicious 45 degree angle, like it had seen too much.

A creepy plastic Santa grinned from the porch... in April.

Tyrel pulled into the driveway slowly. The truck made an uneasy groan.

Camila took one look and said, “Nope. I’m out. This is where kids go missing in movies.”

“We’re gonna die,” Ravi whispered. “I can feel it in my chakras.”

“Chakras can’t be felt. They just are,” Bharath said dryly.

“They’re also screaming, okay?!”

“I think it’s indigestion”

The rest of the crew sat frozen, staring at the house like it might blink.

Sarah, ever the bold white girl in the horror film, hopped out of the truck without a care in the world. “You guys are such drama queens. It’s fine. When has anything bad ever happened at a place like this?”

“Do you never watch movies?” exclaimed Ravi, horrified!

“Nothing about this is fine,” Jorge muttered. “There’s tinfoil on the windows and that garden gnome is definitely holding a knife.”

“That’s a spatula,” Marisol said.

“Same energy,” Jorge replied.

Tyrel climbed out after Sarah, grinning. “Y’all worry too much. We got three Latinos and two Indians. You’re the diversity shield. Ain’t no serial killer touching us.”

“That’s not how it works!” Jorge hissed. “That’s how we die first! This is why I keep telling all of you to watch more Wes Craven movies!”

The front door creaked open before anyone could respond.

Out stepped a man-mid-40s, balding, pale like he hadn't seen sunlight since Clinton's first term. He wore socks with sandals, and a faded Looney Tunes tie-dye T-shirt that said "Don't Have a Cow, Man."

He smiled the way spiders do when you walk into their web.

"You here for the couch?" he asked, voice raspy, like it had been dug out of gravel.

"Yup," Sarah said, unfazed.

"It's in the basement."

He held the door open wider.

"Why is it never in the front?" Ravi whispered. "Why can't couches just be normal and sit in the living room like God intended?"

"Because it's a trap," Jorge said. "This is how organ harvesting starts. He's gonna put our kidneys in a freezer and name them after cartoon characters. Hold me Camila! This white girl is going to get us killed!"

"It's just a couch, guys," Sarah called from the porch. "Be cool."

"Cool?" Ravi wheezed. "The house has a rotary phone, Sarah. A ROTARY. PHONE."

But they followed her anyway. Because peer pressure is more powerful than survival instincts.

The interior was... worse.

Faded wallpaper from the Nixon era. A cuckoo clock that ticked even though it had no hands. There was a porcelain doll in every corner-each one staring directly at Ravi.

"Why are they all facing me?" he whispered.

"Because they know," Bharath said grimly.

"Couch's down here," the man said, gesturing to a dark, narrow staircase that smelled like mothballs and regret.

"We're good," Jorge said, turning to leave. "We'll just... we'll buy a beanbag."

Tyrel was already halfway down. "Come on, y'all. Stop acting like this is The Blair Witch IKEA."

At the bottom of the stairs, the basement unfolded like a serial killer's notice board: wood paneling, fluorescent lights flickering, a water heater making whale noises in the corner, and yes - a beige couch.

Too beige.

Too clean.

As if it had witnessed something and was keeping secrets.

"See?" the man said, from next to the couch. "Good shape. Firm. Barely used. You should all come closer..."

At the top of the stairs, Sarah finally stopped laughing.

"Wait..." she said, brow furrowing. "Why does he have a closet full of candles and mannequin legs?"

Tyrel froze beside her. "And why is there a pentagram painted under the couch?! That's not part of the upholstery..."

Then came the voice.

"Wait, wait! Let me just grab my ritual mask and hockey stick, then you can all come down to the basement. I read in the Serial Killer digest last month that the victims prefer it when you are upfront to them about your intentions. It makes them feel special. What do you think?"

He smiled again. This time, with gums.

Bharath, inexplicably calm for half a second, looked at the man and asked, "Excuse me sir, what exactly do you mean by - OH MY GOD RUN MARISOL," and bolted after Marisol. He grabbed Marisol's wrist like they were escaping a war zone. "DON'T LOOK BACK! IF ANYTHING MOVES - KICK IT!"

Ravi bolted. "NOPE NOPE NOPE!" he shouted, knocking over a lamp, two porcelain cats, and what might have been a taxidermied squirrel with lipstick.

Camila leapt over a pile of old newspapers like a telenovela heroine escaping a dramatic plot twist. "I didn't survive Catholic school in Miami to die like this! I'M TOO YOUNG TO BE FEATURED ON UNSOLVED MYSTERIES!"

Jorge, already halfway up the stairs, shouted, "SANTA MARÍA DE LAS ALMOHADAS MALDITAS!"

Even Tyrel and Sarah - who had up until now been giggle-level brave-finally registered the danger. That was finally enough even for the white kids. Tyrel and Sarah screamed in unison.

Tyrel screamed, "ABORT! ABORT! DEFCON 5 PEOPLE! RUNRUNRUNRUNRUN!" grabbing Sarah's hand like they were escaping from Jurassic Park.

Camila yelled, "DEFCON 1 you idiota. DEFCON 5 is normal."

Sarah shrieked, "YOU SAID THIS WAS PROGRESS!"

Tyrel gasped, "IT WAS! UNTIL HE MENTIONED SERIAL KILLER DIGESTS, SARAH!"

Ravi flung a lamp behind him like it was a grenade. "I KNEW THIS WAS A BAD IDEA! I SMELL BLEACH AND DESPAIR!"

They all exploded out the front door like human confetti.

Bharath shoved it open with his shoulder, Ravi did a barrel roll across the lawn, Jorge tripped over the flamingo planter and kept running, Marisol yelled "LORD TAKE THE WHEEL" and bolted, and Sarah, to her credit, hurdled the porch railing like an Olympic sprinter.

They dove into Tyrel's truck like it was the Ark of the Covenant, piling on top of each other in a heap of limbs, shrieks, and desperation.

"GO GO GO!" Ravi shouted from the passenger side, already halfway into the cab.

Camila dove into the truck bed like it was a foxhole. Jorge pushed her over and climbed in right after.

Marisol flung herself across the back seat while Bharath slammed the door behind them.

Tyrel floored the truck in reverse with the panic of a man who had seen his own obituary. The tires screeched, the engine coughed, and the truck lurched like it, too, wanted to escape this unholy Craigslist ritual.

The man stepped out onto the porch, panting.

"HEY! At least wait till I grab the mask and knife! Don't be so rude! It's vintage! I got it from a guy in Reno who swears it has seen four murders!"

In the rearview mirror, the man stood barefoot on the lawn, shaking his fist in classic villain fashion.

“DARN KIDS! I would’ve gotten away with it too if it weren’t for your suspicious brown friends!”

Everyone gasped.

Tyrel floored it. Gravel sprayed. The truck tore down the street like it was fleeing a zombie apocalypse.

In the silence that followed, Ravi clutched the dashboard. “DID HE JUST SCOOPY-DOO VILLAIN US?”

Tyrel was pale. “Bro said ritual mask. That’s like-code red.”

Sarah was still catching her breath. “I-I don’t know what part of Craigslist that was, but it wasn’t furniture.”

“You guys almost sacrificed us to a DIY exorcist,” Jorge growled. “Because you two thought a twenty-dollar couch was worth death.”

“MY WHOLE LIFE FLASHED BEFORE MY EYES!” Camila yelled, still clutching her chest. “And most of it was in Spanish!”

“Hey, now,” Tyrel said, glancing back. “Nobody got murdered. That’s what matters.”

“Y’all are being dramatic,” Sarah added, adjusting her ponytail. “It was fine. Just some creepy... ritualistic... hobbyist energy.”

“You dragged five brown people into a horror movie house,” Camila snapped. “Because you thought our melanin would absorb the risk!”

“I knew it,” Jorge muttered. “We were the sacrificial diversity offering.”

Ravi pointed at Sarah and Tyrel. “From now on, you two go in first. Every time. You want a couch? You chase the demons.”

Tyrel shrugged. “Still worth it. This is the real college experience.”

Sarah grinned. “Yeah. Cursed couches, Craigslist creeps, and car chases. It’s basically... orientation week.”

“I swear to Vishnu,” Bharath said from the passenger seat, voice ice-cold, “the next person who says the word ‘authentic’ is pushed onto the road. Even if it’s you Sarah”.

There was a long pause after Bharath’s threat.

They sat in silence for a full minute. Just breathing. Shaking. Nobody laughed. Not yet.

Then Sarah- dusty, scraped, and mascara-smudged-let out a soft snort.

“We really almost died for a couch.”

And like that, the tension snapped.

They started laughing. Broken, grateful, ridiculous laughter.

Even Sarah gave a sheepish nod. “Okay. Okay. You were right. Craigslist was...a mistake.”

“Craigslist was a death wish,” Camila snapped. “Next time I want to flirt with the afterlife, I’ll call my ex-boyfriend in Fort Lauderdale.”

Then to everyone’s shock and delight Sarah said softly, “I guess, we could just... buy a new one.”

A collective gasp rippled through the truck.

“You what now?” Ravi said, peeking out from under a blanket like a trauma survivor.

“I mean,” Sarah sighed, “maybe this whole second-hand scavenger hunt thing has gone too far. We were almost... sacrificed. And that couch had eyes, I swear.”

“I told you!” Camila shrieked, jabbing a finger at her. “You only gave in because it stopped being quirky and started being pagan!”

“I vote we buy new,” Marisol said. “Like, imported this week from China kind of new. Fresh foam. Sealed in plastic. No squirrel ancestry.”

“Okay, but I still want it to feel college,” Sarah said. “I don’t want a thousand-dollar sectional that looks like it belongs to a divorced dentist.”

“No one here has a thousand dollars,” Jorge deadpanned.

“But we can all chip in,” Marisol offered, pulling a crumpled ten-dollar bill from her bra like a magician. “We’ve been through war, girl. You deserve comfort.”

“Yeah,” Bharath said, reaching into his wallet. “I’ll throw in a hundred if it guarantees I never have to see another basement again.”

“I have \$100 as well,” Ravi declared. “And a Blockbuster card I could never have used again had that maniac caught us.”

“Count me in for \$50,” Camila added. “And I’m not even sitting on it. I’m sitting on principle.”

Jorge handed over a few tens. “I will personally burn that Craigslist address off the map if it stops haunting my dreams.”

Tyrel slapped down a sweaty twenty. “Let’s go corporate, baby. Let’s sell out. Let’s go to everyone’s favorite shopping destination -”

“SUPER WALMART.”

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.