

How To Sell A Dream In India

Suhas

Chapter 1

The thing about dreams is that they don't care about your address. They come to you whether you live in South Mumbai or South Kolhapur. And mine came to me in the dusty computer lab of Maharaja Engineering College, where the AC worked exactly three days a month and the Wi-Fi connection was as reliable as a politician's promises.

I stared at my laptop screen, the pitch deck for my startup idea glowing back at me. Fourth revision this week. My eyes were burning, partly from the screen's glare and partly from holding back tears after another local investor had basically told me to "get real" yesterday.

"Priya! Lab's closing in five minutes," Sharma sir called out. He didn't need to - I was always the last one to leave.

"Yes sir, packing up," I replied, though we both knew I'd stretch it to fifteen minutes. He understood. Maybe because he saw something in me, or maybe because he knew about Papa's hospital bills that had eaten up our savings last year.

The lab might have been empty, but my mind was crowded with numbers. ₹85,000 - the remainder of my education loan. ₹2,50,000 - my sister Pooja's pending marriage expenses. And ₹50 crores - the estimated capital I needed to truly revolutionize rural education through my ed-tech platform. The gap between these numbers felt wider than the distance between my city and the startup paradise of Bangalore.

My phone buzzed. Mom's WhatsApp: "Beta, Sharma aunty's son is visiting next week. IIT graduate. Working in TCS. Good package."

I sighed, minimizing the message. In my city, girls like me had two acceptable paths: a secure job or a secure marriage. Preferably both. Starting a company? That was for those South Bombay kids who had trust funds to fall back on when their "passion projects" failed.

But they hadn't seen what I had seen. They hadn't taught at the village school during their college internship, hadn't watched bright young minds dim because they couldn't access quality education. They hadn't built a prototype app that could change everything - if only someone would believe in it. In me.

I packed my laptop, its scratched surface a reminder of the second-hand purchase from my senior year. Outside, the evening air was thick with dust from the endless construction that marked all tier-II cities. Progress, they called it. I called it a daily reminder of the change I wanted to bring.

Walking towards my scooter - the same one I'd had since class 12 - I passed by a new billboard. Some startup founder's face smiled down at me, advertising a success story from IIT-IIM. My chest tightened. They never show the faces of small-town dreamers like me.

But as I kicked-started my scooter, something inside me had already made a decision. This city, with its narrow lanes and narrower mindsets, wasn't going to be my final chapter. I just needed a way out. A plan.

What I didn't know then was that sometimes, the price of escape can be higher than the cost of staying put. But that's the thing about ambition - it doesn't show you the full bill until it's too late to return what you've purchased.

I drove through the streets, dodging auto-rickshaws and potholes that seemed to spring up overnight like bad news. The sun had set, but the heat still clung to the air, as if it hadn't gotten the memo about evening. I passed rows of makeshift stalls selling everything from pirated DVDs to plastic toys, their flickering lights like beacons of survival. This city was always hustling, always moving, even if the destination wasn't clear.

As I approached the cramped lanes near home, my phone buzzed again. This time, it was Papa.

"Priya beta, I spoke to Mishra-ji about Pooja's wedding hall booking. He's agreed to a slight discount, but we need to pay him by next week. Do you think you can help with some of it?"

His voice was strained, the guilt barely hidden under his polite tone. Papa had never once asked me for money directly. It was always wrapped in a question, as if that made it easier to swallow. But I knew the truth, my family was depending on me to be more than just their daughter. They needed me to be their safety net.

"I'll see what I can do, Papa," I replied, my voice steadier than I felt.

It was a lie, of course. My savings were a joke, barely enough for the next few months of rent, let alone a wedding. I couldn't think of Pooja's wedding without a tightness in my chest. I loved my sister, but every rupee spent on her big day felt like another step away from my own dream.

After parking my scooter outside the apartment, I took a deep breath before climbing the stairs. The building's cracked walls and peeling paint felt like a physical manifestation of everything I was trying to escape. Home wasn't bad, but it wasn't where I wanted to be. Not anymore.

Inside, Mom was waiting, sitting on the couch with her usual cup of masala chai. She gave me that tired smile, the kind mothers reserve for daughters they worry about but don't fully understand.

“How was your day, beta?” she asked, as if today had been any different from the rest.

“Good, Ma. Sharma sir said I’m close to finishing my project.” Another half-truth. “And I’m working on a new version of the app.”

“That’s nice.” She nodded, stirring her tea. “But beta, don’t work too hard. You know these things are uncertain. You’re doing good work, but we also need to think about stability. Mishra-ji’s son has such a good job, he’s a manager at TCS now, you know.”

I smiled, the kind of smile you give when you’re too tired to argue. “Yeah, Ma, I know.”

She meant well. Of course she did. But it was hard to explain to someone who had spent their whole life surviving that the kind of life I wanted wasn’t about survival. It was about more than just getting by. It was about leaving a mark, building something bigger than myself.

My phone buzzed again, a group chat notification from a couple of startup founders I’d met at an event last week. They were sharing news about a VC meet-up happening in Bangalore. Big names coming, limited invites only. You in?

I stared at the message for a moment, my mind racing. Bangalore was a seven-hour bus ride away, but more than that, it was another world. A world where people like me weren’t supposed to belong.

But what if... what if I could make them see me? What if I could crash into their world with such force that they had no choice but to take me seriously?

“Mom,” I said, glancing up from my phone, “I need to go to Bangalore next weekend. There’s a startup event, big investors, and I think I can get a meeting.”

She frowned, setting her cup down. “Bangalore? That’s far. And what if it’s all a waste of time? You know how these things go. Who will even look at you? You’re not from some fancy family or college.”

Her words stung, not because they were wrong, but because they were exactly what I’d been thinking myself. But I couldn’t let that show.

“I have to try, Ma,” I said quietly. “I’ve worked too hard to give up now.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment, just looked at me with those eyes that held a lifetime of unspoken fears. Then, with a sigh, she nodded. “Alright. But be careful. Don’t get your hopes up too high.”

I forced a smile. “I won’t.”

Later that night, lying on the thin mattress in my room, I stared at the ceiling fan whirring above me. The hum of the fan was the only sound in the otherwise silent apartment. I thought about the VC meet-up, about the names I'd heard whispered in startup circles, people who could change everything with one investment, one introduction.

But would they even look twice at someone like me?

The doubt crept in, like it always did late at night, when the world felt too big and my place in it too small. I pulled the covers tighter around me, willing myself to push the doubt away.

Because here's the thing about dreams, they don't care about who you are or where you come from. They don't care if your family is struggling to make ends meet or if you're just another small-town girl with big ideas. Dreams don't wait for permission. They demand action.

And for the first time, I knew I had no choice. I had to take that bus to Bangalore. Even if I had to beg, borrow, or steal for the ticket.

Chapter 2: The Ambitious Vision

The thing about desperation is that it keeps better time than any alarm clock.

At 3 AM, my laptop's glow was the only light in the house as I tweaked my pitch deck for the twentieth time. Outside, a stray dog barked at shadows while I hunted for the perfect words to make investors believe in me.

"EdTech is a saturated market," the last investor had said, leaning back in his plastic chair at Café Coffee Day. He was wearing a fake Rolex and the smug expression of someone who'd never had to fight for anything. "What makes your idea different?"

I wanted to tell him about Raju, the brightest kid I'd taught during my village internship. How he solved complex math problems using tricks he'd invented himself because he couldn't afford textbooks. How his father pulled him out of school to work at their family's paan shop. How many Rajus were out there, their potential wasting away because education was still a luxury in Digital India?

But I knew better now.

These small-town investors didn't want stories about village kids.

They wanted Excel sheets, market size projections, and buzzwords like 'scalability' and 'network effects.'

So I'd spent weeks rebuilding my pitch.

My app wasn't just another education platform, it was a "democratized learning ecosystem leveraging AI to create personalized pathways for underserved markets."

The same idea, just dressed up in fancy clothes it couldn't afford. Like me in the one formal shirt I'd bought from the export surplus shop for interviews.

My phone buzzed. A WhatsApp message from Pooja di from the other room.

"Still awake? Mom's worried. She says you're becoming too American. 😊"

I smiled despite myself. In our family, "becoming too American" meant anything from eating pizza to wanting a career. Though right now, watching startup pitching videos on YouTube at 3 AM probably qualified.

"Almost done, Di!" I typed back, guilt swirling in my stomach. "You?"

"Too many thoughts.. Exhausting! BTW, u need to come 4 lehenga shopping next week. No excuses! 😞"

The lehenga shopping would eat up an entire day, maybe more. Days I could spend refining my pitch, networking, hustling. But family obligations were like gravity, you couldn't escape them without causing an explosion.

My screen switched to my pitch deck. Slide 15: Revenue Projections. The numbers stared back at me, each zero a reminder of how far I had to go. The local investors' words echoed in my head:

"Beta, why don't you join TCS first? Get some experience."

"This kind of ambitious project needs serious funding. Not possible in this city."

"A girl like you should think more practically."

A girl like me. That's what it always came down to.

I clicked over to my browser, where I'd been researching venture capital firms in Bangalore. Their portfolios read like a who's who of Indian startups. The founders' photos showed people who looked like they belonged in boardrooms, who probably knew what caviar tasted like, who didn't have to think twice before ordering something other than a regular coffee at Starbucks.

But underneath their polished LinkedIn profiles and PR-perfect success stories, I sensed something familiar. They were predators too, in their own way. And predators? They respected neither pedigree nor politeness. They respected the hunt.

I opened a new tab and typed: "How to crack Bangalore startup scene"

The search results loaded slowly, my 4G internet pack had exhausted watching the YouTube videos and I was struggling to load a website like everything else in this city. But I didn't need high speed to know what I had to do.

Outside, the sky was turning that peculiar shade of grey that comes before dawn. The stray dog had stopped barking. In a few hours, the city would wake up, and everyone would resume their assigned roles in life. The shopkeeper's daughter would remain the shopkeeper's daughter. The teacher's son would become a teacher.

But not me. Not anymore.

I saved my pitch deck one final time, naming it "FinalFinal_v18." There is never a time when you have just Final.ppt. It's always Finalv2, FinalFinal, etc. It's the goddamn curse.

Then I opened my email and began typing:

"Dear Mr. Mehta,

I am writing to request a meeting during the upcoming Bangalore Startup Summit..."

The thing about ambition is that it's a lot like hunger. You can ignore it for a while, feed it small snacks of hope and someday. But eventually, it demands a feast. And I was starving.

What I didn't know then was that feasts come with their own kinds of fasts. That every bite of success would require me to swallow my pride first. But at 3 AM in my small town, pride was a luxury I couldn't afford anyway.

I hit send.

I stared at my screen, trying to figure out what angle I could use to break through. The same thought kept creeping into my head: Maybe they're right. Maybe this isn't meant for people like me.

Staring one last time at my screen, I shut the laptop and placed my phone over it at a safe distance.

Sleep was a luxury too.

I shut the laptop with a sigh and looked out the window at the empty road. I closed my eyes and thoughts began.

The Bangalore Startup Summit was less than a week away, and my inbox still looked like a graveyard of unread emails from investors. Each one felt like a personal rejection, but I was getting used to it. Rejection had become a routine part of the hustle.

"Priya, chai le lo," Mom called from the kitchen. Her voice pulled me out of my sleep, and I stood up, stretching my arms above my head.

The smell of freshly brewed chai filled the room as I walked over to the small table where she had placed a steaming cup. She looked at me, concern etched into her face, but said nothing. It was one of those quiet moments between a mother and daughter, where nothing needed to be said aloud because the emotions hung in the air like unspoken truths.

I took a sip and closed my eyes for a second, trying to find some calm in the storm that had become my life.

"What's the plan, beta?" she finally asked, her words soft but loaded with meaning.

"I'm going to Bangalore," I said, setting the cup down with more confidence than I felt. "There's a summit. I'll pitch my idea there."

Mom frowned, stirring her tea. "And what if no one listens? You know how these things go. People like us... they don't look at us the same way they look at those big-city types."

I knew what she meant. People like us, small-town, middle-class, with no real connections. We weren't supposed to dream big. We were supposed to follow the path laid out for us: get a job, settle down, keep our heads low. But I wasn't wired that way.

"They will," I said, my voice firm. "I'll make them listen."

She sighed, giving me that look mothers reserve for their children when they can't decide if they're proud or worried. Maybe both.

"You should've gone to Bangalore after your degree," she said quietly. "Not stayed here. Maybe things would have been easier."

I didn't respond. She was right, of course. Staying back in this small town, with its small dreams and smaller opportunities, had been a compromise. One I thought I could work around. But the truth was, I was starting from a disadvantage, and I knew it.

After breakfast, I packed my bag. The next 48 hours were going to be a blur of trains and buses, each stop taking me closer to Bangalore, and closer to the possibility of failure. But failure wasn't an option I could afford anymore.

The bus to Bangalore was predictably late. As I waited at the chaotic station, surrounded by the mix of people that only Indian bus stations seem to attract, families traveling with more luggage than people, college kids laughing loudly, vendors pushing chai and samosas, I thought about what awaited me.

Bangalore was different. It was the land of startups, where billionaires were made and dreams were bought and sold. It was a city where success stories had roots. But could someone like me even find a foothold in that kind of world?

I caught a glimpse of myself in the reflection of a nearby shop window. A simple kurta, old jeans, and sneakers that had seen better days. The founder on the billboard had probably never worn anything that wasn't designer, and here I was, trying to crash his party with nothing but a pitch deck and desperation.

The bus finally arrived, honking its way through the narrow lane, its exterior dusty from the long journey it had already made. I clutched my bag, trying to ignore the creeping anxiety that had been building in the pit of my stomach. As I boarded, the bus felt like a metaphor for my life, worn out, but still moving forward, determined to reach its destination, no matter how many potholes lay ahead.

I found a window seat and settled in, pressing my face against the glass. The bus jerked into motion, rattling down the street, and with every bump, I felt the weight of the decision I had made. This wasn't just a trip to Bangalore. This was my escape route, my one chance to break

out of the confines of my small-town life. The city faded behind me, the familiar sights disappearing in the blur of passing trees, buildings, and people.

For the first hour, I couldn't stop replaying conversations in my head, Mom's worries, Pooja's wedding plans, the dismissive words of the local investors who couldn't see beyond their balance sheets. Each memory sat heavy on my chest, making me wonder if I was being foolish, if this dream was too big for someone like me.

But as the bus sped along the highway, the doubt started to fade, replaced by something else. The road stretched ahead, long and winding, like the possibilities that lay in Bangalore. I watched the landscape change, the fields giving way to towns, the occasional industrial complex rising against the horizon. The hum of the engine and the rhythmic bump of the tires lulled me into a kind of daze, and for the first time in weeks, my mind felt quiet.

I must have drifted off at some point, because when I opened my eyes, the sun was beginning to dip low in the sky, casting a golden light over everything. The air outside had changed too, warmer, thicker, alive with the pulse of something bigger. I sat up straighter, suddenly aware of where I was. Bangalore wasn't far now.

By the time we pulled into the city, the streets were bathed in that late-afternoon glow, a mixture of orange and pink that made the buildings look almost surreal. Bangalore felt different from anything I'd ever experienced. The skyline stretched out before me, the glass towers reflecting the fading light, and there was a hum in the air, a kind of energy that seemed to vibrate through the streets, through the people, through me.

The bus stopped, and I stepped out onto the pavement, the noise of the city hitting me like a wall. Cars honked impatiently, auto-rickshaws weaved through traffic with an agility I could only dream of, and people moved with purpose. This was a city where things happened, where people were building futures, not just living day by day.

I stood there for a moment, taking it all in. The Bangalore I had read about, the one I had imagined during those long nights in my cramped room, was real. But it wasn't the glamorous startup hub I had built up in my mind. It was gritty, chaotic, alive in a way that made me feel both intimidated and excited.

For a second, I allowed myself to dream, to imagine what it would be like to live here, to rent a tiny cubicle in one of those glass buildings, to start from the bottom and slowly claw my way to the top. I could almost see it: my own office, a team working under me, my app changing lives across the country. It was a beautiful thought.

But I didn't have time for dreams. I had work to do.

The Startup Summit loomed before me, a glass and chrome monument to everything I wasn't supposed to be. Through the revolving doors, I caught glimpses of people who looked like they'd stepped out of LinkedIn profile pictures: crisp suits, designer watches, and the easy confidence that comes from never having to question if you belong.

I adjusted my dupatta and gripped my laptop bag tighter. The security guard gave me a onceover that said everything about how I looked in my export surplus formal wear. But I walked past him with my chin up, the way I'd practiced in front of my cracked mirror at home. Fake it till you make it, right?

The marble floor reflected my worn-out shoes as I approached the registration desk. Behind it, a woman in a blazer that probably cost more than my laptop was checking names on an iPad.

"Hi, I'm Priya Sharma," I said, willing my voice not to shake.

"For the summit."

She scrolled through her list, her perfectly manicured nail sliding down the screen. "I'm sorry, you're not registered."

"There must be a mistake." I pulled out my phone, hands trembling slightly. "I have the confirmation email,"

"Miss," she cut me off, her tone professionally distant, "without proper registration, I can't let you in. The summit is invite-only."

The lobby suddenly felt too bright, too exposed. Around me, conversations in perfect English continued, peppered with words like 'Series A' and 'term sheet', a language I'd learned through YouTube videos at 3 AM.

That's when I saw him.

Arjun Mehta. The prince of the Indian startup scene, holding court by the bar. His father's VC firm had turned three startups into unicorns last year alone. He was laughing at something, surrounded by people who looked like they'd never had their credit cards declined.

I had two choices: walk away with my dignity intact, or...

"Excuse me," I said to the receptionist, my voice steadier now. "Could you check under 'Rural EdTech Initiative'? We're presenting in the social impact track."

It wasn't exactly a lie. I did have an EdTech startup, and it would create social impact, if anyone ever gave it a chance.

She frowned, checking again. "I'm sorry, I don't,"

"Priya? Is that you?"

I turned to find a girl about my age, dressed in business casual that somehow looked both expensive and effortless. It took me a moment to place her, Meera Sinha, from the WhatsApp startup group I'd joined last month.

"Meera! Hi!" I smiled, hoping my relief wasn't too obvious.

She turned to the receptionist. "She's with me. There must have been a mix-up with the registrations. You know how these things go."

The receptionist hesitated, looking between us.

"I can vouch for her," Meera added, pulling out a business card that identified her as a Junior Associate at one of Bangalore's top accelerators.

Five minutes later, I had a visitor badge clipped to my kurta. It wasn't an official summit pass, but it was enough to get me through the door.

"Thank you," I whispered to Meera as we walked into the main hall. "I owe you one."

She smiled, but there was something sharp in her eyes. "Just remember this moment when you make it big. We small-town girls need to stick together."

I nodded, understanding the unspoken contract. In this world, every favor was an investment expecting returns.

The summit hall was packed with the kind of people I'd only seen in Economic Times features. Investors who could make or break startups with a single tweet. Founders who'd turned college projects into billion-dollar valuations.

And there I was, with my second-hand laptop and a dream that refused to fit in my small town. Meera squeezed my arm. "The real networking happens at the after-party at Indiranagar. That's where all the term sheets get signed. Here," She pulled out her phone. "I'll add you to the WhatsApp group."

I watched her type, my mind already racing ahead. The after-party would be easier terrain, less formal, more real. And maybe, after a few drinks, these startup gods would be more willing to listen to a small-town girl with big dreams.

"Just don't pitch anyone directly," Meera warned, as if reading my thoughts. "Build relationships first. These people get pitched everywhere, in elevators, bathrooms, even at their kids' school functions. Be different."

I nodded, taking mental notes. "How did you do it? Break in?"

She smiled, adjusting her blazer. "Same way you're doing it now. One door at a time. One contact at a time. One party at a time." She checked her Apple Watch. "Speaking of which, I need to get to a panel. Text me later?"

As she walked away, I found myself alone in a sea of success stories. But for the first time, I didn't feel like an imposter.

I opened my notes app and typed: "After-party: Indiranagar." Then I looked up at the crowd, my eyes finding Arjun Mehta again. He was still by the bar, but now I noticed something else, the slight boredom in his stance, the way his eyes kept drifting to his phone.

He looked like someone who'd heard every pitch possible. Good. Because what I had wasn't just a pitch.

It was a revolution wrapped in an Excel sheet. And by the end of tonight, he was going to hear it.

I straightened my dupatta and headed for the coffee station. First, I needed to observe. Learn the rhythm of this world. Find its pressure points.

Because the thing about being an outsider is that you see things insiders miss. And right now, I was seeing plenty.

By late afternoon, the summit was winding down, but everyone knew the real action was just beginning.

I'd spent the last few hours doing what Meera had advised, observing, listening, learning the unwritten rules of this world.

My phone buzzed with a notification from the WhatsApp group she'd added me to:

After-party @ The Gatsby, Indiranagar, 9 PM. Dresscode: Smart casual

I glanced down at my kurta.

Smart casual. Another code I needed to crack.

"Need help with that?" I turned to find Meera beside me again, a knowing smile on her face.

She'd clearly read my expression.

"Is it that obvious?" I asked, tugging at my dupatta.

"Please. I was you two years ago." She checked her watch. "Come on, I have a place we can go. My treat."

An hour later, we were in a boutique in Koramangala, where Meera was pulling clothes off racks with the efficiency of someone who'd done this before.

"The trick isn't to look expensive," she explained, handing me a black blazer. "It's to look like you don't need to prove anything."

I caught my reflection in the mirror, the same small-town girl, but now wearing clothes that cost more than my monthly budget. The price tags made my stomach turn. "I can't," I started, but Meera cut me off.

"You can and you will. Consider it an investment." She paused, then added softly, "We'll figure out the payment later. Right now, you need to focus on tonight."

By 9 PM, I was standing outside The Gatsby, a rooftop bar that screamed new money and ambition. Music pulsed from above, and I could see figures moving against the Bangalore skyline.

Somewhere up there was Arjun Mehta, and with him, the key to everything I'd been fighting for. My phone buzzed. A message from Papa: "Beta, about Pooja's wedding hall booking..." I stared at the message, guilt mixing with determination.

The advance payment was due in a week. But right now, standing in borrowed clothes in a city that never slept, I had to focus on one goal. One night that could change everything. I silenced my phone and straightened the blazer Meera had insisted I wear. The night air was thick with possibility, and somewhere in this concrete jungle of dreams and desperation, my future was waiting.

I took a deep breath and walked toward the entrance. The thing about ambition is that it doesn't care about your comfort zone. It drags you to places you never thought you'd go, makes you do things you never thought you'd do. And tonight, I was ready to do whatever it took to make my dream a reality.

The elevator doors opened to the rooftop, and I stepped into a world that existed in a different orbit from my small-town life. Here, under the stars and neon lights, deals were made, futures were bought and sold, and dreams... well, dreams had price tags too.

I just hoped I could afford the cost of mine.

The Gatsby was everything I'd imagined and nothing I was prepared for. Young founders in expensive watches pitched to tipsy investors who could barely hear them over the music. Women in designer dresses networked with the easy confidence of people who belonged here.

And Arjun Mehta held court near the bar, surrounded by an impenetrable wall of admirers and hopefuls.

I found a quiet corner near the outdoor plants and observed, the way Meera had taught me. A founder in a crisp blue suit was pitching something about blockchain to a grey-haired investor. Two women in silk dresses were laughing with a known angel investor, their conversation flowing as smoothly as the champagne in their glasses. Everyone seemed to know everyone else, their casual mentions of IIT and IIM hanging in the air like expensive perfume.

For three hours, I tried to work up the courage, clutching a mocktail I couldn't afford. I rehearsed my pitch in my head until the words lost meaning. Every time I got close to Arjun's circle, someone more important would sweep in. A Stanford graduate. A second-time founder. A CEO's daughter. The patterns were clear – this world operated on a currency I didn't have: connections.

"You should try the whiskey," a voice said beside me. "It's better than staring at it."

I turned to find a young man in a perfectly tailored suit, the kind that screamed old money.

"I don't drink," I replied, my grip tightening on my mocktail.

"Ah, one of those health-conscious founders?" He smiled, extending his hand. "Rahul Singhanian, Elevation Capital."

My heart raced. A VC. Finally. "Priya Sharma," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "I'm working on an ed-tech solution for,"

"Priya!" Meera's voice cut through the moment. She appeared beside me, slightly breathless. "Sorry to interrupt, but there's someone you need to meet."

She pulled me away before I could protest. "Not him," she whispered. "Rahul's known for leading founders on. Zero investments in three years."

By midnight, the crowd had thinned. The serious players had moved to private rooms or other venues, while the rest were too drunk to care about pitches. Meera had disappeared an hour ago, pulled into a conversation with some angel investors.

My phone buzzed. Mom's message felt like a splash of cold water: "Beta, reached home safely?"

Reality crashed back. The return bus ticket for 6 AM felt like a ticking clock, and suddenly, the borrowed clothes felt like a costume I had no right to wear. In the bathroom mirror, I could see the small-town girl peeking through the fancy blazer – the one who still said "main" instead of "I" when nervous, who calculated prices in terms of monthly grocery budgets.

The Uber ride back to the bus station was quiet. I watched Bangalore's glittering skyline recede in the rearview mirror, each tower a reminder of how far I still had to go. The city's promises felt as distant as its lights, and my small-town reality waited at the other end of a seven-hour bus ride.

The thing about dreams is that they don't always tell you the cost upfront. Sometimes, you have to return home empty-handed, swallow your pride, and figure out a new way forward. Because giving up? That wasn't an option I could afford.

As the bus pulled out of Bangalore at dawn, I opened my laptop one last time. The pitch deck stared back at me, along with an unread message from Meera: "Next time, stay longer. Rome wasn't built in 48 hours."

Next time. There would have to be a next time. But first, I had a sister's wedding to help plan, parents to face, and a hometown's expectations to navigate.

I closed my laptop and leaned back, watching the sun rise over a city I'd barely scratched the surface of. Bangalore had shown me one thing clearly: if I wanted to break into this world, I needed more than just a good idea and determination.

I needed a plan. A real one. And maybe, just maybe, that plan would start at home.

Chapter 3: Family Pressures and Sister's Marriage

The thing about dreams is that they come with price tags. And in my family, the currency wasn't just money, it was expectations.

I sat cross-legged on our living room floor, surrounded by wedding catalogs that Pooja di had scattered everywhere. The glossy pages showed brides draped in silk and gold, their perfect smiles hiding the weight of family finances probably crushed beneath their designer lehengas.

"Look at this one!" Pooja di exclaimed, shoving another magazine in my face. "Only seventy thousand. That's reasonable, right?"

I stared at the price tag, mentally calculating how many months of my savings that would eat up. Seventy thousand rupees. That was almost three months of operating costs for my prototype app. Three months of server costs, developer fees, and the salary I'd promised to the part-time content writer I'd hired, a struggling school teacher who believed in my vision enough to work for peanuts.

"It's beautiful, di," I managed, forcing a smile.

"But maybe we should look at some other options too?"

Mom emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her dupatta. The smell of afternoon chai followed her, along with that look she'd been giving me lately, a mixture of concern and resignation.

"Beta, why don't you take a break from your laptop today?" she suggested, settling down beside us. "Help Pooja with the wedding plans. There's so much to do, and time is running out."

Time. That word again. It seemed everyone in my life was operating on different clocks. Pooja di's wedding countdown, Mom's biological clock for my own marriage, Papa's overtime clock at his government job, trying to gather enough money for the wedding. And then there was my startup clock, ticking away precious moments as competitors with deeper pockets entered the market.

"I have a meeting with an investor at four," I said, already reaching for my laptop.

"Another investor?" Mom's voice carried that edge I'd grown too familiar with. "Beta, how many more meetings? Last month you said that Gupta uncle would invest, but nothing happened. Before that, it was Sharma uncle. Maybe it's time to think about,"

"About what, Ma?" The words came out sharper than I intended. "About taking that job at TCS? Or maybe about meeting Mishra aunty's son? The one with the 'secure government job'?"

The room fell silent.

Pooja di pretended to be deeply interested in a wedding invitation sample, while Mom's face did that thing where she tried to hide her hurt but couldn't quite manage it.

"Is it so wrong?" she finally asked, her voice soft.

"To want security for my daughter? To not want to see her struggle?"

I looked at my mother then, really looked at her. The grey streaks in her hair that she'd stopped dyeing to save money for the wedding.

The worry lines around her eyes that deepened every time she thought about our finances. The hands that had worked tirelessly all these years, making sure we never felt the pinch of being a middle-class family in a city that was becoming more expensive by the day.

"Ma," I began, but my phone buzzed. A message from the investor I was supposed to meet.

Sorry, something came up. Let's reschedule.

Another rejection, wrapped in polite excuses. I'd gotten good at recognizing them.

"Show canceled?" Mom asked, reading my face. She'd gotten good at that too.

I nodded, closing my laptop. The familiar weight of disappointment settled in my stomach, but I pushed it aside. "Fine. Let's look at those lehengas."

Pooja di's face lit up, and she immediately pulled out another catalog. But as she flipped through the pages, pointing out embroidery patterns and color combinations, my mind wandered to the Excel sheet hidden in my laptop.

The one that showed our family savings dwindling, the wedding expenses mounting, and my startup dreams getting pushed further into the realm of impossible.

Papa came home early that evening, a rare occurrence that usually meant either very good news or very bad news. The tired smile on his face suggested the latter.

"Mishra-ji agreed to give us the wedding hall at a discount," he announced, settling into his favorite chair. "But we need to pay the advance by next week."

The advance. Another chunk of money we didn't have, another reminder of how dreams had to take a backseat to reality.

Later that night, after everyone had gone to bed, I sat on our small balcony, the city lights twinkling below like fallen stars. My laptop was open to my pitch deck, version 18 now, each iteration a testament to my stubborn hope.

My phone buzzed again. This time it was a WhatsApp message from the startup group I'd joined.

Big startup bootcamp (21 days) in Bangalore next month. Limited slots. Serious founders only.

I stared at the message, my heart racing. Bangalore. The startup capital of India, where dreams weren't dismissed as delusions, where being ambitious wasn't a character flaw.

But Bangalore meant money. Money for travel, for accommodation, for the kind of clothes that wouldn't make investors dismiss me at first glance. Money that should be going toward Pooja di's wedding, toward easing the lines on my parents' faces.

The night air carried the distant sound of a train whistle, and with it, the weight of a decision I knew I would have to make soon. Stay here, play the role of the dutiful daughter, watch my dreams collect dust like the wedding catalogs piling up in our living room. Or take a leap into the unknown, chase something bigger than myself, even if it meant disappointing the people I loved most.

I looked back into our apartment, where Pooja di had fallen asleep surrounded by wedding magazines, where Mom and Papa dreamed their simple dreams of seeing their daughters settled and secure.

Then I opened my laptop and began typing:

"Dear Sir,
Regarding the upcoming investor meet in Bangalore..."

Sometimes, the hardest part about having a dream isn't the dream itself. It's the price you make others pay for it.

The next morning, I woke up to the sounds of clanging dishes and the hum of the ceiling fan. The scent of fresh dosa batter wafted through the apartment, signaling that Ma was already in the kitchen preparing breakfast.

The thoughts from the previous night hadn't left me. In fact, they had multiplied, tangled like the folds of the saree I hadn't worn since my last college presentation. The email draft sat in my outbox, unsent, as if my finger was too afraid to commit to the choice that would bring it to life.

"Beta, breakfast!" Ma's voice cut through my thoughts, and I rubbed my temples, trying to clear the fog of indecision.

Walking into the kitchen, I found Ma humming a familiar tune as she flipped the dosas with practiced ease. Papa sat at the dining table, engrossed in his newspaper as usual, while Pooja di hovered over the table, comparing wedding menus on her phone.

“Good morning,” I mumbled, sliding into my chair as Ma set a steaming dosa on my plate. My stomach was tied in too many knots to feel hungry, but I forced a smile anyway. I knew what was coming next.

“Beta, did you think more about the wedding hall payment?” Papa asked, looking up from his paper. His voice was calm, but I could sense the anxiety behind it. I could always tell when Papa was worried, even though he tried to hide it with his gentle tone.

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. “I’ll figure something out, Papa. Don’t worry.”

Ma glanced over her shoulder, her eyes sharp with the unspoken question she wasn’t ready to ask: “Figure it out how?” I knew the question was coming, just not now, not with the dosa halfway to my mouth.

But as I stared at my plate, the email draft from last night nagged at me. I could feel the weight of it pressing down on me.

Would it really be so selfish to go to Bangalore, just for three weeks? To see if my dream had legs before I had to lock it away for good?

“Pooja, did you decide on the invitation design yet?” Ma asked, deflecting the conversation as if she knew I needed a moment to collect myself. Bless her, she always knew when to give me a little room.

“Almost,” Pooja replied, still scrolling on her phone. “I’m thinking of going with the gold foil print, but it’s a bit over budget...”

“Maybe something simpler would be better,” I offered, trying to redirect my own guilt into something practical. “Elegant but understated.”

Pooja wrinkled her nose but didn’t argue. She knew I wasn’t wrong. None of us could afford extravagance right now.

Later that day, I stood at the threshold of my parents’ room, watching Papa pull out his old leather briefcase. The sight of it brought back memories, him rushing off to work when I was a kid, the smell of freshly pressed clothes and the sound of the clinking keys in his pocket.

“Papa?” I said softly, stepping into the room.

He looked up, startled. “Beta? What’s wrong?”

I hesitated for a moment, then sat down on the edge of the bed. “I’ve been thinking about something... There’s an investor bootcamp in Bangalore next month. It’s a big opportunity, and if I can get funding, maybe I can help with the wedding expenses, too. It might be the last chance for my startup.”

Papa stared at me, his face unreadable. I braced myself for the argument, for the disapproval that would follow, for the words about being practical and responsible.

But they didn't come.

Instead, Papa sighed, his shoulders slumping as he sat down next to me. "Beta, I know how hard you've been working. And I know how much this dream means to you. But are you sure this is the right time? We have so much happening with the wedding..."

"I know, Papa. But... if I don't try now, I might never get another chance. Bangalore is where everything happens. It's the heart of the startup world. I can't just sit here and wait for an opportunity to fall into my lap."

He was silent for a long time, his eyes searching my face. Then, finally, he spoke. "If this is what you really want... we'll manage here. But you have to be prepared, Priya. These things don't always work out the way we hope."

I nodded, my heart swelling with relief and gratitude. "Thank you, Papa."

As I walked out of the room, I could feel the weight lifting off my shoulders. But it wasn't gone completely. I knew the price of this choice, and it wasn't just money, it was the trust my family had placed in me, the expectations that weighed on me like a second skin.

That night, I sat on the balcony again, staring out at the city that was both my home and my cage. With a deep breath, I opened my laptop and hit send on the email I had drafted the night before.

The die was cast. I was going to Bangalore.

Chapter 4: Breaking Point and Decision to Move

The thing about breaking points is that they never announce themselves. They creep up on you, disguised as ordinary moments, until something small tips the scale.

For me, it happened on a Tuesday.

I was sitting in yet another local investor's office, this one smaller than the last. The air conditioner wheezed asthmatically, struggling against the afternoon heat. Across the desk, Mr. Agarwal studied my pitch deck with the kind of dismissive expression I'd grown too familiar with.

"Education technology," he said, dragging out each syllable like he was tasting something bitter. "Very saturated market. Very risky."

I leaned forward, hands clasped to keep them from shaking. "Sir, with respect, my platform is different. We're focusing on rural areas, using a hybrid model that,"

"Beta," he cut me off, "let me give you some advice." He removed his glasses, polishing them with his handkerchief. "A girl like you should think about something more... suitable. Maybe a boutique? Or a beauty parlor? Less risk, good marriage prospects."

The words hit me like a physical blow. A girl like you. How many times had I heard that phrase? How many times had it been used to clip my wings before I could even try to fly?

I stood up, gathering my laptop with hands that weren't quite steady. "Thank you for your time, sir."

Outside, the street was alive with the usual chaos, auto-rickshaws weaving through traffic, street vendors calling out to passersby, the endless symphony of horns and engines. I walked without direction, my mind replaying every rejection, every doubtful look, every well-meaning but suffocating suggestion.

My phone buzzed. A message from Papa: "Beta, need to discuss wedding expenses. Come home early."

Another buzz. Pooja di: "Found perfect lehenga! Need to book tomorrow or someone else will take it!"

A third buzz. Mom: "Sharma aunty's son is visiting next week. Good boy, software engineer."

Each message felt like another brick in the wall that was slowly closing in around me. The weight of expectations, responsibilities, and small-town limitations pressed against my chest until I could barely breathe.

I found myself at the old cyber café where I'd first drafted my business plan. Through the dusty window, I could see schoolkids playing cricket in the narrow lane, their dreams still uncomplicated by reality.

Inside, the familiar smell of instant coffee and printer ink welcomed me. Rajesh bhaiya, the owner, looked up from his ancient desktop computer.

"Arre Priya! Long time. Still working on your startup?"

I nodded, settling into my usual corner. The plastic chair creaked underneath me, a sound that carried echoes of countless hours spent here, researching, planning, dreaming.

Opening my laptop, I pulled up the Bangalore startup bootcamp details again. Twenty-one days of intensive training, networking, and potential investor meetings. The cost was more than I could afford, especially with Pooja di's wedding expenses looming.

But as I sat there, surrounded by the ghosts of my younger self's ambitions, something inside me shifted. Maybe it was Mr. Agarwal's dismissive tone still ringing in my ears, or the weight of all those messages on my phone. Or maybe it was simply time, time for the butterfly to break free of its chrysalis, even if the wings weren't quite ready.

I opened my bank account statement. The numbers stared back at me, a stark reminder of reality. Then I opened another tab: bus tickets to Bangalore.

Sometimes, the bravest thing you can do isn't taking a leap of faith. It's deciding that the ground beneath your feet is no longer enough to hold your dreams.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard for a moment. Then, with a deep breath, I started typing:

"Dear Papa and Ma,

By the time you read this, I'll be on my way to Bangalore..."

The letter took shape slowly, each word carefully chosen. How do you tell your parents that their dreams for you no longer fit? How do you explain that sometimes love means disappointing the people you care about most?

Outside, the cricket game had ended. The street lights were coming on, casting long shadows across the keyboard. In a few hours, Ma would start worrying, calling to ask where I was. Papa would be home from work, ready to discuss wedding expenses and practical matters.

But for now, in this dusty cyber café where my dreams had first taken root, I was writing my declaration of independence. Not with a bang or a shout, but with the quiet determination of someone who has finally understood that some cages are of our own making.

I hit "Book Now" on the bus ticket.

Then I stood up, gathering my things. Rajesh bhaiya looked up from his computer. "Leaving already?"

I smiled, a real smile this time. "Yes, bhaiya. I think it's time."

The thing about breaking points is that once you reach them, there's no going back. Only forward, into whatever darkness or light awaits.

I stepped out into the street, the evening air thick with possibilities. Tomorrow would bring tears, arguments, disappointment. But tonight, under the same stars that shone over Bangalore, I was finally choosing my own path.

Even if I had to walk it alone.

The walk home felt different that evening. Every familiar landmark, the corner chai shop where I'd spent countless evenings brainstorming, the stationary store where I'd printed my first business plan, the temple where Ma prayed for my "sensible future", seemed to be saying goodbye.

My phone buzzed again. This time it was Meera: "Bootcamp applications closing tomorrow. You in or out?"

I paused at our apartment building's entrance, looking up at our second-floor balcony. The lights were on, and I could see Ma's shadow moving about, probably preparing dinner. The weight of the bus ticket confirmation in my inbox felt heavier than ever.

Inside, the scene was exactly as I'd expected. Ma in the kitchen, the pressure cooker whistling its daily song. Pooja di on the sofa, surrounded by wedding catalogs. Papa at the dining table, calculating expenses in his worn notebook.

"Where were you?" Ma asked, not looking up from the daal she was stirring. "Sharma aunty called twice about next week's meeting."

"I was..." I hesitated, then straightened my shoulders. "I was booking my ticket to Bangalore."

The pressure cooker's whistle seemed extra loud in the silence that followed.

Papa's pen stopped moving. Pooja di's catalog slipped from her hands. Ma turned slowly, the daal forgotten.

"What?" Ma's voice was barely a whisper.

"There's a startup bootcamp," I said, the words tumbling out faster now.

"Twenty-one days. Top investors, mentors. It's my chance, Ma. Maybe my only chance."

"But the wedding..." Pooja di started.

"The expenses..." Papa added.

"Your future..." Ma finished.

I looked at each of them, the people I loved most in the world, the ones I was about to disappoint.

"This is my future," I said quietly. "And if I don't try now, I'll regret it forever."

The silence that followed was suffocating, each second stretching longer than the last.

I could feel the weight of their stares, the unspoken disappointment heavy in the air. The pressure cooker hissed again, as if signaling the tension in the room.

"Priya," Papa finally spoke, his voice steady but laced with concern. "Do you understand what you're saying? The wedding is in a few weeks. We're already stretched thin with expenses. Your Ma and I have done everything we can to support you, but right now, we need you to be here."

I swallowed hard, the guilt swelling inside me. Of course, I understood what they were saying.

Every day felt like a delicate balance between my dreams and their expectations, but I also knew that this was a line I had to cross.

"I know, Papa. I know this isn't the best time, but there's never going to be a perfect moment for me to chase this dream. If I wait for everything to be convenient, I'll still be here a year from now, watching someone else live the life I wanted."

Ma's face tightened, her hand gripping the kitchen counter. "We never asked you to give up your dreams, beta," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "But there are priorities. Family comes first. After Pooja's wedding, after things settle down, you can think about your startup. There's no rush."

But there was. There was always a rush when you were standing at the edge of a dream, when opportunity knocked once and could disappear just as fast. They didn't understand the stakes, how the startup world moved at breakneck speed, how connections forged in places like Bangalore could open doors that would otherwise remain shut forever.

"I can't wait, Ma," I said softly. "I need to go now. This isn't just about me. If I succeed, if this startup works, it could change everything for us. For Pooja, for you, for Papa. I could help with the wedding expenses, pay off debts,"

"We're not asking you to be our savior, Priya!" Pooja di's voice broke in, sharp and frustrated. "All we want is for you to be part of this family, to stand with us when we need you most. Isn't that what family does?"

Her words hit harder than I expected.

She wasn't wrong. I had been pulling away, bit by bit, over the past few months, too wrapped up in pitch decks and networking events to be truly present. I had been so focused on my escape plan that I hadn't stopped to see what I was leaving behind.

I took a deep breath. "I'm not abandoning you," I said, my voice calmer now, though my heart raced. "I'll be back before the wedding. It's just three weeks. Three weeks to give this everything I have. And after that, I'll be there for you, completely."

Ma's eyes were clouded with worry, and I could see her mind working through every scenario, every potential outcome. For her, my leaving meant losing control over the future she had carefully envisioned for me, a safe, stable future she thought was best. She was not wrong.

Papa stood up slowly, the chair scraping against the floor, the sound grating in the quiet room. "If this is what you've decided," he said, looking directly at me, "then we can't stop you. But understand, Priya, once you step out that door, you're walking a path none of us can follow. You'll be on your own."

I met his gaze, feeling a lump rise in my throat. "I know, Papa. But I have to take this path. I have to see where it leads."

The room was still. Ma turned back to the stove, her shoulders stiff as she stirred the daal. Pooja di picked up her catalog, flipping through the pages half-heartedly. Papa sat down again, his pen hovering over the notebook but not moving.

I took a step toward the door, the weight of their disappointment following me like a shadow. I wanted to say more, to promise that everything would be okay, that this was the right choice. But I couldn't bring myself to speak. The truth was, I didn't know if it would be okay. All I knew was that I had to go, had to try.

If I spoke more, nothing would separate me and the politicians I saw on TV everyday. Big words Priya, big words!

As I stepped out into the cool night air, the street felt different from before. The world outside my home was filled with unknowns, challenges I wasn't sure I was ready for, possibilities that scared and excited me in equal measure. But as the breeze swept past, it carried with it a sense of freedom I hadn't felt in a long time.

I stretched out and took a deep breath and let it all out. I had done it. I had told my parents.

I checked my phone. The bus to Bangalore was booked for early morning. Meera's message flashed on the screen again: "*You in or out?*"

I smiled to myself as I typed my response: "*In.*"

It wasn't just the bus ticket or the bootcamp I was committing to. It was to myself.

To all those times I'd watched opportunities slip away because I wasn't bold enough to grab them.

To all those moments when I'd seen others achieve what I knew I could have, if only I'd been brave enough to try.

No more waiting.

No more hesitation.

This time, I would be the one taking action.

To the dream that had kept me awake at night, that had pushed me past every rejection and every doubt. This was the moment I had been building toward, and there was no turning back now.

As I made my way down the street, the lights of my small town flickering behind me, I knew that tomorrow would be a new beginning. One that I would have to carve out with my own hands, no matter how difficult or lonely it became.

Because sometimes, choosing yourself, choosing your dream, means stepping away from everything you know, everything you love, and trusting that, somehow, it will all be worth it in the end.

Chapter 5: Starting Fresh in the City

The Bangalore air hit me differently than Kanpur's.

It was a peculiar mix of exhaust fumes, coffee, and something else, opportunity, perhaps?

Or maybe just pollution.

My train had arrived at Krantivira Sangolli Rayanna Station at dawn, and I stood on the platform clutching my two suitcases, wondering if I'd made the biggest mistake of my life.

The station buzzed with early morning energy, porters in red shirts weaving through crowds, chai vendors calling out their prices, families huddled around piles of luggage.

I felt small and insignificant, a speck in this sea of humanity all moving with purpose while I stood frozen, my fingers clutching the handle of my suitcase so tightly my knuckles turned white.

"First time in Bengaluru?" The auto driver asked, noticing my wide-eyed stare at the flyovers and tech parks we passed. I was surprised he knew English.

His rearview mirror revealed a man with kind eyes and a mustache that needed trimming.

"Is it that obvious?" I smiled weakly while the soothing cold Bangalore winds hitting my face.

"All newcomers have that same look. Half terrified, half excited." He navigated through the morning traffic with practiced ease. "You're coming for IT job, madam?"

"Not exactly," I replied.

"I'm here to start my own company."

He laughed, not unkindly. "Oooohh! Ambitious! Good, good madam."

"Bengaluru needs more women entrepreneurs. My daughter also dreams of business. She is in 10th standard now."

I didn't tell him how many people had laughed at my dreams back home. How Papa had called me impractical. How local investors had patted my head like I was a child playing make-believe. The memory of their patronizing smiles fueled my determination as we pulled up to my new home, a PG accommodation in Koramangala, one of Bangalore's startup hubs.

The building was a five-story concrete structure, painted a fading shade of yellow with clothes hanging from balconies like colorful flags. A small board at the entrance read "Sri Lakshmi Ladies Hostel" with a list of rules too small to read from the street. The auto driver helped me unload my bags, wished me good luck, and disappeared into the morning traffic, leaving me alone on the unfamiliar street.

I took a deep breath and pressed the bell.

The PG was exactly as advertised on the website: cramped, functional, and just within my budget. Four girls to a room, one bathroom to share, and strict rules posted on every wall. My three roommates were already gone for the day, their rumpled beds and lingering scents of different shampoos the only evidence of their existence.

Mrs. Radha Krishnan, the PG owner, showed me around with mechanical efficiency. "Breakfast 7 to 9 AM. Dinner 8 to 10 PM. No boys allowed inside. No cooking in rooms. No coming after 10 PM." She handed me a key attached to a plastic keychain. "₹7,000 per month, advance for three months."

I handed over ₹21,000, nearly half my savings, and tried not to wince as the money left my hands. Three months. That's how long I had to either make progress or admit defeat.

"Dinner is vegetarian only. You want non-veg, eat outside," Mrs. Krishnan continued, barely pausing for breath.

"Water timing is 6 AM to 9 AM and 6 PM to 9 PM. Fill buckets in bathroom.

Wi-Fi password on notice board. 1 GB per day limit."

I nodded, trying to keep up with the barrage of information. Mrs. Krishnan finally left me alone in the room, the door closing behind her with a definitive click.

The space that would be my home for the foreseeable future was roughly fifteen feet by twelve. Four single beds with thin mattresses were pushed against the walls. The wardrobe was divided into four uneven sections with makeshift cardboard partitions. A single ceiling fan rotated lazily overhead, pushing around the warm air rather than cooling it. The window overlooked another identical building, so close I could have reached out and touched it if the grilles hadn't been in the way.

I sat on the bed and ran my fingers over the rough cotton sheets. They had visible stains, nothing like the freshly pressed, soft sheets Ma always prepared back home. A feeling of revulsion washed over me, but I pushed it down. This wasn't the time for homesickness.

After unpacking my meager belongings, I sat cross-legged on my thin mattress and opened my laptop. My business plan stared back at me, fifty-two pages of research, financial projections, and implementation strategies for bringing quality education tech to rural areas. In Kanpur, it had seemed ambitious but possible. Here in Bangalore, surrounded by tech giants whose office buildings I'd passed on my auto ride, it suddenly felt childish.

My phone buzzed with a message from Ma: "Reached safely? Call when you can. Papa still upset."

I closed the message without replying.

I couldn't deal with their disappointment right now.

Instead, I opened LinkedIn and began searching for startup events in Bangalore. If connections were what I needed, I would make them.

Another message popped up, this time from Pooja di: "Ma hasn't stopped crying. Please call."

I turned the phone face down, my heart a mix of guilt and resolve.

My sister's wedding preparations would be in full swing now.

The thought of her managing alone while also dealing with Ma's tears and Papa's disappointment made my stomach knot with guilt.

But I couldn't let that distract me now.

I had my own battles to fight.

My stomach growled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten since the idli-vada breakfast on the train. I ventured out, following Google Maps to a nearby darshini, one of those stand-and-eat places that Bangalore is famous for. The masala dosa was crisp and delicious, the sambhar spicier than I was used to. As I ate, I watched people around me, IT professionals grabbing quick lunches, delivery drivers collecting orders, college students laughing over shared plates.

Everyone seemed to belong here except me.

After lunch, I walked the streets of Koramangala, trying to get my bearings. The area was a strange mix of old and new India, gleaming office buildings next to traditional homes, international coffee chains beside tiny tea stalls, luxury cars navigating around cows lounging in the middle of the road. Everywhere I looked, there were signs of the startup ecosystem I'd come to join, co-working spaces, tech company offices, cafes filled with people typing furiously on MacBooks.

I stopped at one such cafe, ordering the cheapest coffee on the menu to justify using their Wi-Fi. For the next few hours, I sent cold emails to every investor and startup accelerator I could find, customizing each message to sound personal even though I knew most would never be read. I applied to five pitch competitions, joined seven Bangalore startup groups on Facebook, and followed dozens of VCs on Twitter.

By evening, my roommates had trickled in.

Divya worked at an IT company, coding for clients she never met. Ananya was in digital marketing, her day spent managing social media accounts for brands that couldn't be bothered to do it themselves.

Renuka was studying for MBA entrance exams while working part-time at a coffee shop.

All three had been in Bangalore longer than me, and all three looked at me with a mixture of amusement and pity when I explained my purpose.

"Startup funding? In this economy?" Divya laughed, sprawled across her bed with her laptop balanced on her stomach. "My company just laid off fifty people last month."

"It's not impossible," I argued.

"Bangalore has the highest concentration of VCs in India."

"Yes, and they all fund IIT boys who've already worked at Google," Ananya replied, applying a face mask that smelled of cucumber.

"Trust me, I've managed social media for three failed startups. The founders were brilliant, but no one would give them money."

Divya nodded vigorously. "Especially for women founders. You have any idea how biased the funding scene is here?"

"What's your idea anyway?" Renuka asked, more kindly than the others.

I explained my vision, a platform to connect quality teachers with rural schools through technology that worked even with limited internet access.

As I spoke, I felt the familiar passion rising in my voice.

When I finished, there was a brief silence.

"It's actually... really good," Renuka admitted.

"But good isn't enough," Divya said, closing her laptop. "You need connections."

"Or a gimmick," Ananya added. "Something that makes rich VCs feel like they're changing the world while making money."

I nodded, taking mental notes. These girls knew the city, knew its rhythms and rules. They'd been where I was now.

"There's a startup mixer tomorrow at Koramangala Social," Renuka offered. "I can get you in. My coffee shop is catering it."

"Really? Thank you!" I felt a surge of gratitude.

"Don't thank me yet," she warned. "These events are mostly just ego competitions. But occasionally someone useful shows up."

We ordered dinner from a nearby restaurant, the luxury of food delivery still novel to me, and ate together on our beds, talking about our homes and families. Divya was from Chennai, Ananya from Kolkata, and Renuka from a small town in Maharashtra. Like me, they'd all come to Bangalore chasing something, jobs, education, independence.

"First week is the hardest," Divya said, offering me an extra roti. "Then you get used to it. Find your places, your people."

"My first month, I cried every night," Ananya admitted. "Called my mom begging to come home. Now? I can't imagine living anywhere else."

"The city grows on you," Renuka agreed.

"Like a fungus."

We all laughed at that.

After dinner, I took a quick shower, mindful of the limited water, and changed into my night clothes. The others were watching something on Ananya's laptop, but I excused myself.

I needed to prepare for tomorrow's mixer.

That night, I lay awake listening to the unfamiliar sounds of Bangalore traffic and my roommates' gentle snoring. Back home, my small room had felt confining. Now, I missed its privacy. I missed Ma's cooking, Papa's morning newspaper rustling, even the neighbor's rooster that crowed at exactly 5:30 AM.

But I couldn't go back.

Not empty-handed.

Not as a failure.

I opened my laptop again, the screen illuminating my small corner of the room. I had twelve hours until the mixer. Twelve hours to learn everything I could about Bangalore's top investors, to refine my pitch until it was perfect, to transform myself from a small-town girl with big dreams into someone they'd take seriously.

The problem was my wardrobe, I'd packed practical clothes, not networking outfits. Nothing that screamed "successful founder." I mentally calculated how much I could afford to spend on a new outfit without seriously depleting my savings. Not much.

As if reading my thoughts, my phone buzzed with a notification, ₹5,000 deposited to my account. A message from Ma followed: "For expenses. Don't tell Papa. Call soon."

Tears pricked my eyes. Ma had always been my silent supporter, even when she didn't fully understand my dreams.

The money was probably from her secret stash, the emergency fund she'd been building for years from household savings.

I typed back a quick thank you, promising to call soon, then returned to my research.

As I researched, a particular VC firm caught my eye, Horizon Ventures.

They had recently funded an education technology startup, and according to their website, they were "actively seeking disruptive innovations in the education sector."

Their managing partner, Vikram Singhania, was featured prominently, young, Harvard-educated, with a carefully cultivated casual look that probably cost more than my entire wardrobe.

Something about his profile intrigued me. Unlike the other partners, his bio mentioned his father first, "son of industrialist Rajiv Singhania", before listing his own accomplishments.

A quick Google search revealed party photos, gossip columns, and very little substantial business news. It seemed Vikram Singhania had been given his position rather than earning it.

I scrolled through his Instagram, public, surprisingly, noting his interests, his hangouts, the people he followed. He posted about startup events, but also about parties, sports cars, and weekend trips to Goa. In one photo, he posed with a famous actress, his arm casually draped around her shoulder. The caption read: "Just another Thursday. #VILife."

I clicked through to Horizon Ventures' upcoming events. They were hosting a pitch competition next month. Grand prize: seed funding of fifty lakhs and mentorship. Application deadline: two weeks away. The theme: "Technology Solutions for Rural Development."

It was as if the universe was speaking directly to me. My startup idea fit perfectly within their criteria. But so would hundreds of others, most backed by people with better credentials and connections than mine.

I needed an edge. Something to make my application stand out.

I returned to Vikram's social media, studying it more carefully now. His comments, his likes, the people he engaged with most frequently. A pattern emerged, he responded enthusiastically to attractive young women, often with flirtatious comments that bordered on inappropriate for a professional account.

I felt a plan forming in my mind. Not the plan I'd come to Bangalore with, that naive belief that pure merit would be enough. No, this was something different. Something that made my stomach twist with both excitement and unease.

If the system was designed for connections, not merit, then perhaps I needed to create my own connections.