

# Dear Sher, Sherniyo!

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## Prologue: The Sound of Dreams

It was a snowy evening in Queens when Jai overheard a conversation that would change the trajectory of his life. He was seven years old, still learning the rhythm of America, when a group of boys in his school cafeteria began to brag. One of them, the son of a banker, spoke casually, as if narrating a fact of life: "My dad already gave Harvard a donation. They'll take me, no matter what my grades are. It's all about connections, bro. Not about brains." The other boys laughed, clinking their soda cans together like miniature aristocrats celebrating their future. Jai didn't laugh. He went home that night, tugging on the sleeve of his father's worn jacket. "Papa, is it true that rich kids get into Harvard just because they're rich?" Jorginder Singh, once a farmer in Punjab, now a gas station cashier in New York, looked at his son with tired eyes. He wanted to tell him the truth: yes, money often carved shortcuts through life. But he also wanted to plant hope. So he said, in Punjabi-accented English, "Beta, duniya mein paisa bahut kuch kharid sakta hai. But remember—mehnat se bhi har darwaza khulta hai." That sentence burrowed itself deep inside Jai's chest. From that day, Harvard wasn't just a school. It was a symbol, a fortress guarded by privilege, and Jai decided he would storm its gates not with wealth, but with determination.

## Chapter 1: Apartment of Sacrifice

The Sharmas lived in a cramped one-bedroom apartment in Queens. The walls were thin, the rent was high, and the heat never worked properly in winter. The kitchen doubled as a study room, and the dining table was scarred with pen marks from Jai's endless scribbling. Lajwanti Sharma, Jai's mother, worked as a house cleaner. Her hands were permanently dry from bleach and soap, but she never complained. Each evening, she brought home stories—not of the mansions she cleaned, but of the hope she carried. "We came to America for you, Jai," she would remind him, tying his turban with gentle fingers. "One day, you will go further than we ever could." Jorginder, stoic and quiet, worked double shifts at the gas station. When he returned at midnight, his uniform smelling of gasoline and exhaustion, he would glance at his son bent over textbooks. Sometimes he would whisper, "Bas, beta. Get some rest." But Jai rarely listened. For him, sleep was negotiable; Harvard was not.

## Chapter 2: The Weight of Poverty

Poverty wasn't abstract—it was daily. It was the subway rides with a backpack missing a zipper. It was declining birthday party invitations because he couldn't afford gifts. It was watching classmates leave for summer camps while he stayed back, working part-time at a local grocery store. When the SAT season arrived, the divide between wealth and struggle became sharper. Jai's peers boasted about expensive prep courses and private tutors. He couldn't afford even the cheapest workbook. Instead, he borrowed secondhand guides from the library and studied under the flickering streetlight outside his building when the apartment grew too noisy. One evening, as snow fell softly outside, his mother left two parathas wrapped in foil on the table. She kissed his forehead and whispered in Punjabi, "Tu kar lega." (You will do it.) That whisper carried him through nights of fatigue and self-doubt.

## Chapter 3: Fighting Shadows

High school wasn't kind. There were teachers who saw him as "the immigrant boy" destined for mediocrity. There were classmates who mocked his father's accent at the gas station. Sometimes, Jai wanted to disappear into the background. But every insult became fuel. He poured himself into academics, science fairs, debate club, and volunteering. His essay in the school paper, titled "The Price of Dreams," caught the attention of his English teacher, who told him, "You don't just have a mind, Jai. You have a voice. Use it." That voice would later become his strongest weapon.

#### Chapter 4: The Essay That Changed Everything

When application season arrived, Jai sat down to write his Harvard essay. He could have pretended to be polished, rehearsed, or privileged. Instead, he chose honesty. He wrote about his father's turban being mocked in public, about his mother's English being ridiculed, and about how those moments didn't break him but carved resilience into his bones. He wrote about studying by candlelight during power cuts in Punjab, and later under streetlights in Queens. He wrote not about what he lacked, but about what he had—the inheritance of grit. His closing line read: "If Harvard is the fortress of privilege, let me prove that a boy with nothing but determination can walk through its gates and belong."

#### Chapter 5: The Letter

April came. Jai logged into the admissions portal on the family's old laptop, its keyboard missing two keys. His hands shook as he clicked. The words appeared: "Congratulations..." He froze. His mother, hovering behind him, leaned forward. His father removed his glasses, wiping his eyes roughly. Then, in that tiny kitchen, the three of them embraced. The parathas on the table grew cold, but no one cared. For the first time in years, their poverty felt irrelevant. They had broken into a world that was never designed for them.

#### Chapter 6: Belonging and Building

At Harvard, Jai often felt like an outsider. Students spoke casually about skiing in Aspen, summers in Paris, and family foundations. He, on the other hand, worked part-time in the library to pay for books. But instead of shrinking, he built. He founded a South Asian mentorship program for first-generation students. He tutored underprivileged kids in Cambridge. He asked hard questions in classrooms, not to impress professors, but to make sure voices like his parents' were never ignored. When recruiters came to campus, Jai didn't chase Wall Street glamour. He interned with public policy groups, determined to use his Harvard education not to escape his roots, but to honor them.

#### Chapter 7: Convocation

Years later, the Harvard Yard glistened with banners and robes. Jai, now a graduate, stood at the podium delivering the student address. He scanned the crowd until he saw them—his father in a simple kurta, his mother in a sari that shimmered with pride. "My parents came to this country with nothing but grit," he said, his voice steady. "They donkeyed themselves from Punjab to America so that I could dream bigger than survival. Today, I am not just a Harvard graduate. I am proof that dreams are not the privilege of the wealthy, but the inheritance of the determined." The applause thundered. For the first time, Jorginder and Lajwanti didn't feel like outsiders in America. They felt like pioneers.

#### Epilogue: The Ripple Effect

Jai went on to build a career in public policy, fighting for fairer education systems and greater opportunities for immigrant families. He often visited schools in Queens, standing before classrooms of children who looked just like him. “Don’t let anyone tell you Harvard—or life—is only for the rich,” he would say. “Your parents’ sacrifices are your greatest inheritance. Build on them.” For Jai, Harvard was never the end. It was the beginning of a life lived not just for himself, but for those who carried the weight of dreams across oceans.