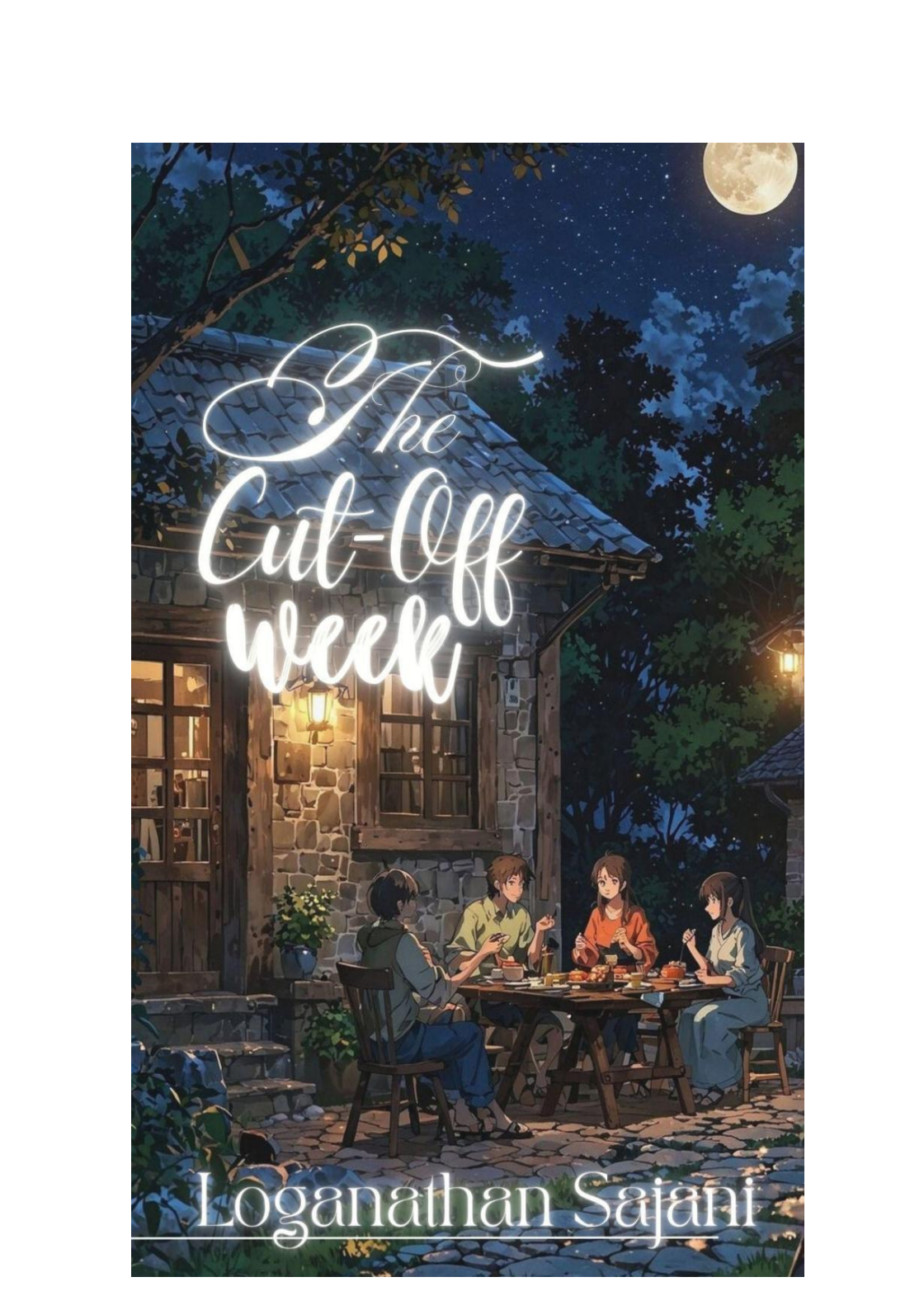


An anime-style illustration of a night scene. Four characters are seated around a wooden table outdoors, eating and talking. The setting is a stone house with a tiled roof, illuminated by warm interior and exterior lights. A large, full moon hangs in the dark, starry sky above the trees. The overall mood is peaceful and intimate.

The Cut-Off Week

Lōganathan Sajani

THE CUT-OFF WEEK

Loganathan Sajani

First Publication

GreenHill International School Kandy
Grade 10

ISBN: 978-624-211-162-9

Dedication



Foreword

In an increasingly complex global future, the "Hemamala Upahara" book project, led by Mahamaya Girls' College, stands as a turning point in girls' education. Over a decade, it has successfully nurtured thousands of children to become young authors.

This year, by collaborating with other schools, we aimed to provide students with a wealth of new experiences. The goal was to develop multi-faceted skills, including communication, values, and creative growth. As a result, children have written books that pay tribute to Princess Hemamala, who brought the Sacred Tooth Relic—the supreme symbol of the Buddhist world—to the Hill Country (Kandy).

I extend my gratitude to everyone involved, including the students who contributed their creativity and the teachers who guided them.

Shashikala Senadhira

Principal

Mahamaya Girls' College.

Afterword

With the approval of the Ministry of Education, this research-based project has empowered thousands of student authors for over ten years. Educationists recognize it as a program that significantly enhances the quality of school education.

In alignment with modern educational reforms, encouraging students to author research work is a milestone in this journey. In this digital age of "Smart" technology, the modern school must demonstrate through research that books and technology should be used together. This is because the unique joy a child receives from a book cannot be replaced by anything else.

To prevent children from drifting away from books—which remain our primary educational tool and storehouse of human knowledge—Mahamaya Girls' College has spearheaded the "Hemamala Upahara" project for many years. Its primary objectives are to foster academic discipline, promote values, and pay tribute to Princess Hemamala, who fulfilled a historic mission to empower women.

We express our gratitude to the Principal, teachers, parents, alumni of Mahamaya Girls' College, representatives of other schools, the Diyawadana Nilame, and the staff of the Sri Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic) for their support.

Seneviratne Mahalekam

(Project Creator)

Preface

I am pleased to extend my greetings on the occasion of this e-book project organized by Mahamaya Girls' College, Kandy collaborating with our School Library Council.

This initiative reflects the creativity, critical thinking, and enthusiasm of our students. It is encouraging to see young minds engaging in reading, writing, and sharing knowledge through modern digital platforms.

My sincere appreciation goes to the librarian, the Librarian, Library Council, teachers, and students whose efforts made this publication possible. May this project inspire a continued love for learning and discovery.

A special word of thank you to Mr. Seneviratne Mahalekam for his continuous guidance given to our teachers and students.

Wishing you every success.

Dr. Lalith Navaratne
Principal
Greenhill International school Kandy

Congratulatory Message

It is a great honor for me, as the Governor of the Central Province, to send a congratulatory message for the launch of the books created through the Hemamala Tribute Book Creation Project initiated by Mahamaya Girls' College, Kandy.

Education is the fundamental foundation for the progress of society, and it is further strengthened through books and literary creations. It is clearly commendable that students' talents, creativity, and intellectual abilities are emerging through projects such as this.

I believe that this book creation project will provide valuable knowledge and a precious literary contribution not only to the students but to the entire society. Furthermore, I hope that through such efforts, future writers who will bring pride to Sri Lanka will emerge.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation and blessings to the Principal, the academic staff, the students, and everyone involved who dedicated themselves to this successful endeavor. I wish this project and the book launch ceremony great success.

Sarath B.S. Abeykoon
Governor, Central Province
Emeritus Professor, University of Peradeniya
2026-05-10

Congratulatory Message

I highly appreciate the noble and outstanding effort of the Principal and the academic staff of Mahamaya Girls' College, Kandy, the student daughters, the students of other participating schools, and everyone who dedicated themselves to plan and implement this book publication project. The project was organized under the leadership of Mahamaya Girls' College, Kandy, with the participation of other schools in the Kandy Zone, with the aim of encouraging children toward book creation within the current school system, as a tribute to Hemamala Kumariya who brought the Sacred Tooth Relic to Sri Lanka.

For several decades, Sri Lanka has been committed to providing free, compulsory, quality, and equitable education to all children, thereby producing a future generation of intelligent and skilled citizens. In such a context, this book creation program for school children helps develop creative ability, critical thinking, and other positive qualities for a balanced and well-rounded personality, and contributes to building a future knowledge-based society.

May all activities of the Hemamala Tribute Book Creation Project be successful through the blessings of the Sacred Tooth Relic.

Pradeep Nilanga Dela
Diyawadana Nilame,
Sri Dalada Maligawa.
2026.05.10.

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Introduction

Cut-off Week is a humorous and heartwarming story about four friends who attempt to go off their phones for an entire week and what havoc—mostly funny and some even disastrous—happens to them from runaway watermelons, errant geese, and rainy days to failed experiments and overzealous plans. By the end of the week without being connected, Maya, Leo, Mia, and Dev learn the value of real-life occurrences, the ridiculous nature of unavoidable accidents, and the importance of friendship without a screen in between. It's a relatable story for modern teens who often have their faces glued to phones and tablets that even the simplest of experiences can turn into an epic adventure. Filled with humor, mischief, and heart, The Cut-off Week presents life as a more chaotic yet more enjoyable adventure when one looks up instead of down at a screen.

Main Characters

Leo: The gamer, up late playing online and ranked games.

Maya: The social media queen with an Instagram following and TikTok popularity obsessed with likes.

Dev: The quiet one, observing more than participating, he loves to read but scrolls more than he admits.

Mia: The ambitious planner who is competitive and suggests the challenge.

Chapter One

The Soundless Table

The cafeteria buzzed with noise. Plates clattered, trays scraped against tables, and somewhere in the distance, a group of juniors was singing “Happy Birthday” at the top of their lungs. The smell of fries and onion rings filled the air, mixing with the tangy smell of disinfectant that the janitor had sprayed earlier.

But at the corner table near the window, four friends sat in silence.

Leo leaned forward, elbows on the table, thumbs moving at lightning speed across his phone screen. His face was locked in a look of grim determination. A muffled “YES! Got him!” escaped his lips, earning a few strange looks from students passing by.

Next to him, Maya was more concerned with her

reflection than her lunch. She had tilted her phone at exactly the right angle to capture the sunlight streaming through the cafeteria window. Her lips were pursed, her hair adjusted for the thirteenth time. “Ugh, why is this lighting making my face look like a potato?” she whispered, snapping and deleting pics with practised speed.

Dev, on the other hand, was scrolling through an endless stream of memes, his earbuds in. He chuckled now and then, shaking his head. “Ha ha, Cat with hat. Classic.” Nobody asked what he was laughing at, and he didn’t bother to explain.

Mia sat opposite to them, her untouched sandwich lying forgotten on her tray.

She watched them, her so-called best friends, with growing irritation. To the outsider, they might have looked like a picture-perfect group of teens hanging out together. But in reality, they were more connected to their screens than to each other.

Finally, she slammed her water bottle down on the table.

The sound cut through the noise like a whip crack. Leo flinched, losing his game. “Mia! That was my final kill!”

“Good,” she snapped. “Maybe now you’ll actually look at me.”

Maya moaned. “Mia, please, can this wait? I’m trying to get a decent selfie, and you just ruined my vibe.”

“And I was laughing at something hilarious,” Dev added lazily, though he didn’t even glance up from his phone.

Mia narrowed her eyes. “Do you all realize what’s happening right now? We’re sitting together but not actually together. When was the last time we talked? Like, really talked?”

Leo waved her off. “We talk all the time. Just yesterday I told you about my level-up—”

“That doesn’t count!” Mia cut in. “You were talking to me about your game while playing your game. You didn’t even notice I’d left halfway through.”

Dev gave a smug look. “To be fair, none of us notice when you leave. You’re really quiet.”

“Exactly!” Mia threw up her hands. “We’re supposed to be best friends, but our friendship is just... background noise now . Do you even know what I ate for lunch yesterday ?”

Maya perked up. “Did you post it on Instagram?”

Mia groaned and slapped her forehead. “See? This is what I mean. We’re addicted. And I think it’s time we admit it.”

Leo looked offended. “I’m not addicted. I just... need to game every day, or I’ll fall behind the leader-boards. It’s called commitment.”

“And I’m not addicted either,” Maya protested, though her hand was still adjusting her hair out of habit. “I just like sharing my life with the world. It’s... community service.”

Dev shrugged. “Okay, fine. Maybe I scroll too much. But what do you expect us to do instead? Talk about algebra? The weather? Please spare me.” Mia leaned forward, her voice lowering like she was about to reveal a dangerous secret. “What if we went one week without our phones?”

The three of them froze. Leo’s jaw dropped. Maya let out a dramatic gasp loud enough to make the juniors at the next table turn their heads. Dev slowly pulled one earbud out, like he couldn’t believe what he’d just heard.

“One week?” Leo sputtered. “That’s self-murder. I’ll miss my game updates, my tournaments—”

“My followers will think I died!” Maya cried, clutching her phone to her chest.

“Do you want me to lose my streaks?” My brand image? My reputation?”

Dev gave a slow, amused smile. “And what about me? Without memes, who even am I?”

Mia crossed her arms. “That’s exactly the point. We’re losing ourselves in these screens. So here’s my deal: one full week offline. No gaming. No Instagram. No memes. Just us. Whoever breaks the rule...” She paused dramatically. “...buys everyone else pizza.”

Now she had their attention.

Leo squinted at her. “Any pizza? Like, large with extra cheese?”

“Yes,” Mia said firmly.

Maya chewed her lip, clearly torn. “Even if someone DMs me? Even if I miss a collab offer?”

“Yes.”

Dev leaned back, smirking. “This is madness. Pure, chaotic madness. And yet... I’m intrigued.”

Leo groaned. “Fine. But when I lose my leaderboard rank, I’m blaming you.”

“Deal,” Mia said, grinning as she held out her pinky.

One by one, reluctantly, they all hooked their pinkies with hers. The fact was made.

Maya sighed dramatically. “Goodbye, Instagram. Hello, caveman life.”

Dev chuckled. “This is going to be ridiculous.” And just like that, the challenge began.

Chapter Two

Day One

The next morning, the school corridor looked the same as always: posters peeling off the notice board, the faint smell of chalk dust in the air, and the chaos of students rushing to their classes.

But for Leo, Maya, and Dev, everything felt wrong.

“Do you realise we’re basically walking around blind?” Maya whispered as she gripped her bag like it carried treasure. “No phones. No updates. No weather app! What if it rains and my outfit gets ruined?”

Mia, walking ahead of them, smirked. “Then you’ll discover this ancient invention called an umbrella.”

“This isn’t funny,” Maya cried, her voice echoing down the hallway. “I can already feel my followers wondering where I am. My DMs are probably exploding right now.”

Leo dragged his feet beside her, looking like someone had died. “You think you’ve got problems? My entire gaming clan is probably fighting without me. They’ll forget I exist. I’ll be replaced. This is social suicide.”

Dev shoved his hands into his pockets. “At least you two had exciting online lives. All I did was scroll the memes and laugh alone. Now I’ll have to... laugh with you losers instead.” What a frustration. Hey!” Mia spun around, pretending to be offended. “We’re not losers. We’re survivors. Survivors of the greatest challenge of our generation: life without Wi-Fi.”

“Ha. Very inspirational,” Leo muttered.

By lunchtime, the cracks were already showing.

They sat at their usual table, staring at their trays of food in awkward silence. Without phones to distract them, the silence felt heavier than usual. Maya poked at her pasta with her fork, Leo balanced a grape on his spoon, and Dev leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling tiles.

Finally, Maya snapped. “I can’t do this! Talking face-to-face is so... exhausting.”

Mia crossed her arms. “Then get used to it. This is only Day One.”

“I need something to do,” Leo groaned, slumping in his chair. “Anything.”

“Fine,” Mia said, thinking fast. She picked up a fry and tossed it at Leo.

It hit his forehead with a satisfying hit. “Hey!” he yelled, sitting up straight.

“Now you’re paying attention,” Mia said sweetly.

Within seconds, it escalated. Leo flicked a grape at Maya. Maya shrieked, grabbed a bread roll, and lobbed it across the table at Dev. Dev, calm as ever, caught it midair and took a big bite.

“Impressive,” he said with his mouth full.

The other three burst out laughing, the tension finally breaking. For a moment, it didn’t matter that they had no screens. They were too busy dodging food and laughing like maniacs.

But the meltdown wasn’t over.

That night at home, things got worse.

Leo sat on his bed, staring at his silent console. He paced the room, muttered strategies to himself, then finally collapsed dramatically on his bed.

“This is cruel and unusual punishment,” he sobbed into his pillow.

Maya sat in front of her mirror, ring light off for the first time in months. Her face looked strange without a camera lens pointed at it. “Who even am I if I’m not posting?” she whispered to her reflection. She tried sketching in her notebook instead but ended up doodling random shapes that all looked like hashtags.

Dev sprawled on his floor, flipping through an old book he’d found in his cupboard. He read a few lines, then sighed. But after a while, something surprising happened: he got pulled in.

Hours later, when his mother knocked to say goodnight, he realized he’d forgotten all about memes.

And Mia? She sat at her desk, writing in her diary like she always did. She was struggling too, but she refused to admit it. “I’m the leader,” she whispered to herself. “If I crack first, we’re doomed.”

The first day was over. Somehow, they had survived. But little did they know, the real fun was just beginning.

Chapter Three

The First Split

By the third day, the group looked like survivors of a minor disaster.

Leo tiptoed into class with dark circles under his eyes, muttering about “dreaming of unfinished missions”.

Maya dragged her feet into the room, hair slightly frizzy, outfit mismatched—a crime in her world.

Dev had ink stains on his fingers from scribbling in his notebook all night. And Mia, though she tried to act confident, was chewing her pen cap like it had personally offended her.

“Morning, team Vampire,” Dev said dryly as they drooped into their seats.

“Don’t. Just... don’t,” Leo cried, laying his head on the desk.

Maya buried her face in her hands. “Do you know how embarrassing it is to walk into school and realize I don’t know what’s trending? What if there’s a new TikTok dance? What if I’m already irrelevant?”

“Relax,” Mia said, rolling her eyes. “Nobody is going to forget you in three days.”

“That’s precisely what irrelevant people say,” Maya muttered dramatically.

At lunch, things got worse.

They sat at their usual table, but without phones, facing each other; time crawled by painfully. Leo started stacking fries into a little tower, Maya twisted her hair into tiny braids, and Dev just stared at the clock, sighing loudly every five seconds.

“Okay, this is ridiculous,” Leo said finally, flicking his fry tower over. “What did people even do for fun before phones?”

Mia's eyes lit up. "Talk." The other three groaned in harmony. "Fine," she said, ignoring them. "Let's play a game. "Truth or dare."

"Oh no," Maya muttered. "This can't end well." Mia smirked. "Leo. Truth or dare?"

"Truth," Leo said purposefully.

"What's the most embarrassing thing you've ever Googled?" ahh

Leo's face turned rosy. "I... uh... once Googled 'Can eating toothpaste kill you?' when I was ten, okay?!"

Dev choked on his juice, laughing so hard that it spit onto the table.

"Unbelievable. Our gaming warrior was once defeated by Colgate."

"Shut up!" Leo cried, but he was smiling too.

"Next who?" asked Dev.

This time it's Maya's turn. She chose "dare", trying to look brave.

Mia's smirk widened. "I dare you to walk up to that teacher over there and ask him how to become TikTok famous."

Maya's jaw dropped. "You wouldn't."

"Oh, I would."

The group broke out into laughter as Maya, red-faced but determined, strutted across the cafeteria. The poor teacher, confused and flustered, mumbled something about "focus on studies first". Maya returned to the table, glaring at them but unable to stop laughing at herself.

For the first time in days, the silence broke.

That evening, instead of going straight home, they wandered into the park near school. The air was crisp, kids were playing cricket on the dusty field, and a stray dog was chasing a kite that had fallen.

Leo, restless, spotted a Frisbee

half-buried in the grass. “Let’s play.”

“Grasshopper? Seriously?” Maya said, wrinkling her nose.

“Come on,” Leo insisted, already tossing it to Dev. To everyone’s surprise, Dev caught it cleanly and tossed it back. Soon, Maya was screaming as the grasshopper narrowly missed her head, and Mia was laughing so hard she fell onto the grass.

It wasn’t perfect. The Frisbee landed in a bush, then in a puddle, then almost hit a passing cyclist. But by the end, they were all sweaty, out of breath, and smiling like kids again.

“This feels... weird,” Maya admitted, collapsing on the grass. “Like, fun-weird. I didn’t think that was possible without Wi-Fi.”

Dev stretched his arms behind his head. “Shocking, right? Humans communicating. Next thing you know, we’ll start writing letters with actual pens.”

“Don’t push it,” Leo cried, though his smile betrayed him.

As the sun dipped behind the trees, painting the sky orange and pink, Mia looked at her friends and felt something shift. For the first time in a long while, they weren’t distracted. They were present.

Maybe, just maybe, this crazy challenge was working.

Chapter Four

The Hangout Adventure

The park became their new hangout spot.

On the fourth afternoon of their challenge, the group tramp there after school, carrying nothing but their bags, water bottles, and their creativity. No phones, no earbuds, no excuses. Just four teenagers trying to survive the longest week of their lives.

The park wasn't much to look at: patches of grass worn thin, a dusty basketball court with one crooked hoop, and a fountain that hadn't worked since forever. But it had space, and space, apparently, was all they needed.

All sat down there for a while.

"Okay," Leo declared, clapping his hands together. "Today, we do something epic."

Maya raised an eyebrow. “Like what? Solve world hunger? Because unless it involves Wi-Fi, I’m out.”

Everybody’s eye was on Maya, and it had never happened before.

“Nope,” Leo said with a grin. He pointed to the abandoned basketball court. “We’re playing a game. And before you say you don’t know how, Maya—that’s the point. We’ll figure it out.”

Mia groaned. “Leo, none of us are good at basketball.”

“Exactly!” Leo’s grin widened. “That makes it fair.”

At first, it was confusion.

Leo kept charging at the hoop but missed every shot by a mile. Dev surprised everyone by being decent at dribbling, though he was so calm about it that it annoyed Leo. Maya shrieked every time the ball came near her, dodging like it was a bomb. And Mia—the self-proclaimed planner of the group—kept trying to invent rules nobody followed.

“Travelling!” she yelled at Leo.

“What does that even mean?” he yelled back.

“I don’t know! But I heard it on TV once!”

By the end, they were all laughing so hard that random joggers stopped to stare at them like they were super.

Exhausted, they collapsed under a tree, sipping water and catching their breath. That’s when Maya pulled a small sketchbook from her bag.

The others looked at her in surprise. “Since when do you carry that around?” Dev asked.

Maya shrugged, suddenly shy. “Since yesterday. I was... bored at home.

Couldn’t take selfies. So I, um, started sketching again.”

She flipped open the pages. Inside were surprisingly detailed pencil drawings: the outline of the park, a funny caricature of their math teacher, and even a half-finished portrait of Leo glaring at his game console.

“Whoa,” Mia breathed. “Maya, these are incredible.”

Maya’s cheeks flushed pink. “They’re okay. I never post them because they don’t really fit my... aesthetic.”

Leo leaned over, grinning. “Forget selfies. You’re, like, the Picasso of our group now.”

Maya rolled her eyes, but she couldn't hide her smile.

Later, as the sun dipped lower, Dev pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket.

“What’s that?” Mia asked.

He hesitated, then said, “A poem. Don’t laugh.”

He read aloud, his voice low but steady. The poem was about silence—not the peaceful kind, but the lonely kind that follows you when everyone around you is too busy to notice you’re there.

When he finished, the group was quiet. Even Maya, who always had a comment ready, looked thoughtful.

“That was...” Leo started, fumbling for words.

“Excellent.”

“Like, really good,” Maya added softly.

Dev shrugged, embarrassed. “I just... write sometimes. Helps me think.”

Mia smiled. “You should share more of them.”

For a moment, the group sat in the orange glow of sunset, each lost in thought. They had all discovered something new that week: about themselves, about each other. And none of it would’ve happened if their phones had been glued to their hands.

“Okay, confession time,” Leo said suddenly, breaking the mood. “I only play games so much because I’m... kind of average at everything else. At least online, I feel like a hero.”

The others looked at him with soft eyes.

“You don’t need to be a hero,” Mia said gently.

“You’re already our Leo.”

“Yeah,” Dev added with a smirk. “Besides, you’re a legend at missing basketball shots. Nobody can beat you at that.”

Leo groaned. “Thanks, man. Really helpful.”

They all burst out laughing again, their voices echoing through the park.

For the first time in forever, it felt like the world beyond their phones was worth exploring.

Chapter Five

Hidden Talents

The next day at school, something felt different.

Instead of sitting at their table in silence, each glued to a screen, the four of them actually talked. Not small talk, but real conversations. Leo animatedly described the Frisbee game from yesterday, exaggerating how “he almost scored the winning shot” (which wasn’t true at all). Maya pretended to be offended that her “masterpiece sketches” didn’t already belong in an art museum. Dev, to everyone’s surprise, offered to read another poem if they promised not to laugh.

And Mia? She just sat back, smiling, watching her friends turn into the people she’d always known they could be.

It was like a switch had flipped.

By the afternoon, however, their new “offline lifestyle” started causing... complications.

“Did anyone write down the homework from chemistry class?” Mia asked as they walked down the corridor.

Three blank stares met her.

“Uh...” Leo scratched the back of his neck. “Isn’t it usually posted in the Whats App group?”

Maya gasped. “Oh no. The group chat. I completely forgot it even existed!”

Dev smirked. “Look at us. Four rebels against society, bravely failing our exams for the sake of this challenge.”

“Not funny,” Mia said, though she was laughing too.

During break, Maya found herself sketching in her notebook instead of checking her feed. Soon, a few classmates crowded around, curious.

“Wow, you drew that?” one of them asked, pointing to her portrait of their math teacher. “It looks exactly like him... but angrier.”

Maya smirked proudly. “That’s because I drew it while he was yelling at Leo yesterday.”

“Hey!” Leo protested.

Within minutes, half the class were flipping through her sketchbook, asking for their own caricatures. Maya’s cheeks glowed with pride. For once, people were impressed by something offline.

Meanwhile, Dev found himself in the library, of all places. He usually avoided it like the plague, but now he wandered in and discovered a dusty shelf of poetry books. He started copying down verses he liked, then, with sudden courage, scribbled one of his own on a scrap of paper and slipped it into a random book for some future reader to find.

For the first time, he didn't feel invisible.

Leo's moment came in P.E.

Normally, he avoided sports, claiming he was "saving his energy for the virtual world." But that day, without excuses, he picked up a football and joined in. To his own shock, he wasn't bad. His passes were clumsy, but his energy and speed made him surprisingly useful.

"Nice one, Leo!" a teammate shouted after he made a lucky goal. Leo's grin stretched wider than when he'd ever won an online match.

That evening, the group met again at their park spot. Each of them had stories to share—Maya about her new "fan club", Dev about his secret poem drop, and Leo about his unexpected football skills. Mia listened, heart swelling with pride.

"You see?" she said, leaning back against the tree.

"This is what I wanted. We're actually... living.

Discovering things we never would've if we were stuck on our phones.”

Leo nodded slowly. “You might be right. Don’t tell anyone I said that.”

Maya hugged her sketchbook to her chest. “Okay, but seriously, one week isn’t enough. I might actually keep sketching after this.”

“And I might actually keep playing football,” Leo admitted.

Dev smirked. “And I might actually keep writing. Who knows, maybe I’ll publish a book one day.”

Mia beamed. “See? Hidden talents everywhere.”

The sun dipped low, the sky glowing orange and purple. As they sat there laughing and teasing each other, they realized something: maybe losing their screens wasn’t the end of the world.

Maybe it was the beginning of one.

Chapter Six

The Cafe Evening

By Friday, the group had developed a new habit: walking home together instead of rushing off to their own corners of the internet.

That day, while wandering through the town, they spotted something unusual. Tucked between a mobile repair shop and a clothing store was a tiny, old-fashioned cafe with a faded signboard that read, “The Corner Cup”.

It looked ancient—wooden doors, glass windows smudged from age, and not a single neon “Free Wi-Fi” sticker in sight.

“Whoa,” Maya whispered. “This place looks like... my grandma’s living room.”

“Which means,” Dev said dramatically, “no one from our school has ever set foot here.”

“Exactly why we should go in,” Mia said with a grin.

Leo groaned. “Do they even have food? Or is it just dust and disappointment?”

But curiosity won, and they pushed open the creaky door.

Inside, the café was cosy—mismatched chairs, the smell of coffee and cinnamon, and shelves lined with old board games instead of chargers and extension cords. An elderly couple ran the place: the grandmotherly lady behind the counter gave them warm smiles, while her husband shuffled around arranging cups.

“Welcome, dears,” the lady said. “Sit anywhere you like.”

The friends sank into a corner booth, half-expecting cobwebs to fall on them.

“What can I get you?” she asked.

“Uh... milkshakes?” Leo asked hopefully.

“Four, coming right up,” she said with a wink.

While waiting, Maya’s eyes lit up at the shelf.

“Guys. They have Monopoly.”

Dev snorted. “No way. That game ruins friendships.”

“Which is exactly why we should play,” Maya shot back, grabbing the box.

Ten minutes later, the table was chaos. Leo bought every property he landed on, crowing like a villain. Maya kept shrieking whenever she had to pay rent. Dev calmly hoarded money and pretended to be broke. And Mia tried—and failed—to keep everyone following the rules. “Dev, you literally just hid 500 under your sleeve!” Maya yelled.

“It’s called strategy,” Dev said coolly. “You’re a cheater!”

“And you’re broke.”

Mia groaned. “I knew this was a bad idea.”

The old man from the counter chuckled as he passed by. “Don’t worry, children. Monopoly has ended many friendships, but it also makes the best memories.”

By the time their milkshakes arrived, Leo was dramatically declaring himself the “real estate king”, Dev was still suspiciously rich, Maya was sulking, and Mia was laughing so hard she nearly spit her drink.

“This place is... perfect,” Maya admitted between sips. “No Wi-Fi, no noise, just us.”

“Yeah,” Leo agreed reluctantly. “It’s kind of nice.”

Dev leaned back in his chair, smirking. “I could get used to this.”

Mia's eyes sparkled. "Then it's settled. This cafe is officially our headquarters."

They all raised their glasses in a toast, clinking them together. "To the Offline Week!"

The elderly lady smiled at them from behind the counter, as if she'd seen dozens of groups like them before—kids discovering, for the first time, that life without screens could still be sweet.

Chapter Seven

Milkshake and Temptation

The Corner Cup quickly became their second home.

By Saturday, they'd already claimed the booth near the window as "theirs". The old couple who ran the cafe seemed delighted to see young people spending time there every evening.

And for the four friends, it felt like stepping into another world—a place

where nothing beeped, buzzed, or pinged.

That day, they ordered a pile of fries and four milkshakes and grabbed another board game from the dusty shelf: Jenga.

The first few rounds were harmless. Maya squealed every time the tower wobbled. Leo dramatically flexed before pulling out a block. Mia carefully strategised her every move. Dev, annoyingly calm as usual, slid pieces out like he was some kind of Jenga master.

“Okay, but can we raise the stakes?” Leo asked after a few rounds.

“Like what?” Maya asked suspiciously.

“The loser has to do a dare,” he said with an evil grin. “Oh no,” Mia muttered. “This is going to end badly.”

It did.

Within twenty minutes:

Mia was forced to stand outside the cafe and loudly sing the school anthem to confused pedestrians.

Dev had to drink Maya's milkshake through a spoon—which took forever and made everyone laugh until their stomachs hurt.

Leo was dared to do ten push-ups in the middle of the cafe, grunting like a fighter. The old lady even clapped for him.

And Maya? She got the ultimate dare: to draw a caricature of the cafe's grumpy-looking cat.

“Behold!” Maya announced dramatically, flipping her notebook to reveal the masterpiece.

The drawing showed the cat wearing a crown and sitting on a throne of fries. Even the old man at the counter laughed. “That cat does act like a king, you know.

”For a while, everything was perfect. Their laughter filled the cafe, the kind of joy that didn't need likes or comments to exist.

But then it happened. Maya's bag buzzed.

The four froze. The sound was faint but unmistakable. A notification.

Maya's eyes widened. "I—I forgot to switch it off. I just... shoved it in my bag."

Leo raised an eyebrow. "What was it? Instagram? Email?"

Maya swallowed hard. "Email. Probably nothing. Or maybe..." Her voice trailed off.

Mia leaned forward. "Or maybe what?"

Maya bit her lip. "I've been waiting for a reply from a small brand collab. If it's them... it could mean free clothes. Or even a sponsorship."

Silence fell over the table. For Maya, this was huge. She'd been chasing influence dreams for months.

“Open it,” Leo said immediately. “No!” Mia and Dev said together.

Maya’s hand hovered over her bag. Her pulse quickened. Just one quick peek... no one would know. She could delete it after. It wouldn’t even count, right?

Her fingers touched the zipper—then froze.

She looked up at her friends. Mia’s eyes were pleading. Dev was watching quietly, his expression unreadable. Leo looked torn between curiosity and loyalty.

Finally, Maya pushed the bag away. “No. Not now. If I open it, it’ll feel like none of this week mattered. And I don’t want that.”

Mia reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “I’m proud of you.”

“Me too,” Dev said softly.

“Fine,” Leo said with a grin. “But if it was free food instead of clothes, I’d have opened it in a second.”

The tension broke, and everyone laughed again.

When they left the cafe that evening, Maya felt lighter than she had in months. She realized something important: the collab could wait. Likes, followers, brands—they’d all still be there tomorrow. But these moments with her friends? They are happening right now.

And for once, she didn’t need to post them to know they were real.

Chapter Eight

The Pancake Disaster

Saturday afternoon, Mia's house smelt faintly of detergent and home-cooked food—the kind of safe, warm scent that made everyone feel welcome. But today, that scent didn't last long.

“Alright, chefs,” Mia announced as the four of them gathered in her kitchen. “Today we prove that we can survive without food delivery apps. We are going to cook.”

“Correction,” Leo said, leaning against the counter. “~~We~~ are going to cook. I am going to supervise while eating snacks.”

“Wrong,” Mia said, shoving an apron into his hands. “Everyone works. That's the rule.”

Dev eyed the counter suspiciously, where eggs, flour, sugar, and milk were laid out. “What are we making?”

“Pancakes!” Mia said brightly. “Simple. Easy. Foolproof.”

“Keyword being ~~of~~ Dev muttered.

Maya clapped her hands. “Ooooh, pancakes! We can make them aesthetic. Like those stacks you see in brunch cafes. With syrup dripping down the sides and strawberries arranged in—”

“Stop,” Leo groaned. “We’re just trying to eat, not win Master-chef.”

At first, things went... okay.

Mia handled the batter like a pro. Leo cracked eggs—though one cracked too hard, splattering across the counter like a crime scene. Maya was in charge of cutting fruit, though she spent more time arranging it into smiley faces than anything practical.

And Dev... well, Dev stirred the batter as if he were performing a scientific experiment.

“You don’t need to measure in millimetres,” Leo complained.

“Precision is the foundation of art,” Dev replied coolly.

“Pancakes are not art!”

“Tell that to Van Gogh.”

“Van Gogh didn’t make pancakes!”

The real disaster began when it was Leo’s turn at the stove.

“Flip it carefully,” Mia instructed, standing beside him.

“Relax, I got this.” Leo slid the spatula under the pancake, swung his wrist—and launched it halfway across the kitchen. It slapped against the fridge with a sad plop.

Maya screamed. “The pancake is dead!”

Dev smirked. “Moment of silence, please.”

Mia pressed her hand to her forehead. “Why do I even try?”

But the chaos only got worse. The second pancake came out burnt, the third raw in the middle, and by the fourth, Leo had somehow managed to smoke up the entire kitchen.

“Are you ~~high~~?” Mia yelled.

“I don’t know! The stove hates me!” Leo shouted back, fanning the smoke.

Maya was too busy laughing to help, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Oh my god, this is the best thing I’ve ever seen. We’re going to poison ourselves!”

Dev calmly pulled out his phone, only to remember it was switched off. “Shame,” he said. “This would’ve been a viral video.”

Eventually, the four of them slumped on the floor, surrounded by destroyed pancakes, sticky counters, and a faint smell of charcoal.

Mia buried her face in her hands. “We are a disaster.”

Leo patted his stomach. “Correction: we are hungry.” For a moment, there was silence—until Maya groaned. “Wait... how are we supposed to get food? We can’t order delivery.” They froze.

All week, they had been so proud of not touching their phones. But hunger was a cruel enemy.

“Technically,” Dev said slowly, “if we order pizza on the phone... it’s not ~~and~~ it’s survival.”

“Nope,” Mia said quickly. “That’s cheating. We said no phones for a week. No shortcuts.”

“Fine,” Leo said, standing up dramatically. “Then we do this the old-fashioned way. Like warriors. We march to the pizza shop.”

“It’s literally two streets away,” Dev muttered.

“Exactly! A heroic quest!”

Ten minutes later, the four of them were walking down the road, still in Mia’s oversized kitchen aprons, looking like a group of runaway chefs. People on the street stared. One kid even pointed and whispered, “Why are they dressed like that?”

Maya groaned. “This is humiliating.”

“This”, Leo corrected, puffing out his chest, “is called fashion. Kitchen couture.”

“More like kitchen clown,” Dev said dryly.

They finally reached the tiny pizza shop at the corner, where the smell of melted cheese and oregano nearly knocked them over with joy.

“Four large pizzas, please!” Leo announced grandly, as if he were ordering for royalty.

The shop guy raised an eyebrow. “Big party?”

“No,” Maya said flatly. “Just starvation.”

When they returned to Mia’s kitchen with the pizza boxes, it felt like a victory parade. They threw off their aprons, tore open the boxes, and devoured slice after slice like they hadn’t eaten in weeks.

As they stuffed their faces, Maya raised her glass of soda dramatically. “A toast—to our pancake funeral.”

“To chaos,” Dev added. “To survival,” Mia sighed.

“To never letting me near a stove again,” Leo said.

Their glasses clinked, and laughter filled the smoky kitchen, louder than the sound of any notification could ever be.

For once, failure tasted delicious.

Chapter Nine

School without Screens

Monday morning was a test. Not the kind with multiple-choice questions, but the kind where everyone in Mia's group had to face a terrifying truth: a school day without phones.

By the time she reached her classroom, Mia's hands kept twitching toward her pocket, as though her phone would magically reappear. But it didn't. And strangely, the silence wasn't empty—it was full.

First Period: Boredom vs. Notes

Math class began, and the teacher scribbled equations across the board. Normally, half the class would secretly peek at their phones under their desks. Today, everyone was forced to either listen... or find new ways to survive.

Leo immediately went to Plan B: paper notes.

This is torture. If $X = \text{happiness}$, then $\text{my life} = 0$.

He flicked the note toward Dev, who read it with his usual calm. Stop being dramatic. Solve for effort instead of happiness. Leo wrote back instantly: Effort? I left that at home. Dev smirked faintly and returned to his notebook.

Meanwhile, Maya pulled out her sketchpad. By the end of the lesson, she had doodled their math teacher as a superhero—cape flapping, giant calculator in hand, complete with a speech bubble that read, “Solve for destiny!”

She slipped it to Mia, who bit her lip trying not to laugh. Unfortunately, Leo caught sight of it too. He burst out laughing, so loud the teacher froze mid-equation.

“Something funny, Leo?”

“Uh...” Leo panicked, shoving the doodle into Dev’s lap. “No, sir. Just remembered... a joke.”

Dev, stone-faced, raised his hand. “The joke was his brain.”

The class erupted, and the teacher sighed in defeat.

Break Time Games

Without phones, the hallway during break felt... different. No glowing screens. No TikTok dances being filmed in corners. Just voices, footsteps, and energy.

“Let’s play something,” Maya suggested.

“Like what? Tag?” Leo scoffed. “Why not?”

Within minutes, a group of students were running through the corridor, chasing each other like kids in primary school. Mia, breathless with laughter, ducked behind a column only for Leo to find her.

“Gotcha!” he said, tapping her shoulder.

“Cheater!” She shrieked and chased him back into the crowd.

A teacher eventually stepped in, scolding them for “acting like monkeys”. But the four of them couldn’t stop grinning.

Lunch Break Antics

In the cafeteria, the missing phones became even more obvious. Usually, students photographed their food or watched reels while eating. Now, conversations filled the air.

“Humans are... talking,” Leo whispered dramatically, pointing at a group of juniors.

Mia rolled her eyes. “So shocking.” They decided to create their own entertainment: balancing grapes on Leo’s head.

“One grape,” Maya counted, placing it carefully.

“Two grapes,” Mia added. “Three...”

By the time Dev stacked the fifth grape, Leo sneezed and the grapes exploded across the table.

“Food fight!” someone yelled.

Suddenly, bread rolls and fries flew through the air. Trays clattered.

Teachers stormed in, shouting over the chaos, but the damage was done—the cafeteria had turned into a battlefield.

Amidst it all, Maya calmly sketched Leo with grapes as a crown, labeling him King of Grapes. When she showed the drawing, even Dev cracked a smile.

An Unexpected Answer

The last class of the day was English, and Mia's mind buzzed. Normally, she'd sneak quick Google searches to help with poetry discussions. Today, she had no choice but to think for herself.

The teacher asked, "What is the poet trying to express here?"

Silence. Then, before she could stop herself, Mia raised her hand. "It's about... invisibility. About how people hide their real selves behind masks.

The poet is saying silence can be as heavy as words."

The teacher blinked, surprised. "Exactly. Well said, Mia."

Mia blinked back, cheeks warm. She hadn't Googled it. She hadn't even rehearsed. She had just... understood.

Maya whispered, “Queen moment.” Leo clapped under the desk.

Dev gave a small approving nod.

And just like that, Mia realized she didn’t need her phone to feel smart.

After-School Reflections

As the final bell rang, they walked out together, backpacks slung, the late afternoon sun spilling across the street.

“You know,” Leo said, “today didn’t actually suck. No memes, no scrolling. Just... dumb fun.”

“I actually feel lighter,” Maya admitted. “Like my brain has space to breathe.”

“We laughed more than usual,” Dev added.

Mia looked at her friends, smiling. For once, her head wasn’t buzzing with notifications or updates. Just real voices, real moments, and laughter that echoed more than any ringtone ever could.

Chapter Ten

The Temptation

By the sixth day of their digital detox, the four friends were starting to feel like experts in the offline life. They had survived kitchen disasters, rainy chaos, and even stargazing without fact-checking constellations on Google. But temptation has a way of creeping in when you least expect it.

It started with Leo.

He was sprawled on Mia's couch, tossing a tennis ball into the air and catching it, over and over. "So, technically... technically... checking cricket scores isn't social media, right?"

Mia groaned. "Don't start this again."

“Come on!” Leo whined. “India’s playing today. What if it’s a historic match? What if we’re missing—”

“Then it’ll still be historic tomorrow,” Maya said, snatching the ball midair.

Leo sulked. “Easy for you to say. Your entire life isn’t measured in runs and wickets.”

But later that evening, temptation struck Maya too.

She was sketching when she froze. “Oh no.”

“What?” Mia asked

“My art account,” Maya groaned. “It’s been SIX DAYS. Do you know how many followers I’ll lose? My algorithm is probably dead. Buried. Gone.”

“Algorithms aren’t real friends,” Dev said calmly.

“Spoken like someone who doesn’t have any followers,” Maya snapped back.

Mia gently patted her shoulder. “Relax. Your drawings are good enough to survive a week.”

Maya still looked like she was mourning a lost child.

By the next day, it was Mia’s turn.

She had been helping her mom in the kitchen when she suddenly gasped. “Oh no, oh no, oh no!”

“What now?” Leo asked.

“My favourite drama!” she cried. “They release episodes every Friday. Today’s Friday!”

Leo smirked. “So it begins. The addiction speaks.”

Mia crossed her arms. “You literally begged about cricket yesterday.”

“Sports are different,” Leo argued. “It’s culture.”

“And dramas aren’t?” Mia shot back.

They were two seconds away from throwing ladles at each other when Maya yelled, “Both of you need rehab.”

The only one who hadn’t cracked yet was Dev. But even he felt the pull.

Late that night, when the others were asleep, he sat alone in the living room. His phone lay in the drawer nearby. He could almost feel it—calling to him, like a tiny glowing demon.

What if he had important emails? What if he missed an assignment update?

What if his gaming group thought he’d vanished forever?

His hand hovered over the drawer handle.

But then he heard soft laughter upstairs—Maya’s muffled giggle, Leo’s dramatic whining, and Mia’s playful scolding. And he pulled his hand back.

Not tonight.

The next day, the four of them admitted it out loud.

“I almost checked cricket scores,” Leo confessed.

“I almost logged into Instagram,” Maya muttered.

“I almost streamed my drama,” Mia said sheepishly.

Dev hesitated, then nodded. “I almost opened my phone too.”

They all stared at one another, surprised. Then slowly, they began to laugh.

“Wow,” Mia said, shaking her head. “We’re all weak.”

“But we didn’t do it,” Dev reminded them.

“That’s the point.”

“Barely,” Leo groaned. “If this detox was ten days instead of seven, I’d be in a psychiatric ward.”

“Don’t worry,” Maya smirked. “We’d come visit you. Offline, of course.”

That night, they sat together on the balcony with bowls of popcorn, playing card games under a dim lantern. Leo kept cheating, and Dev kept catching him. Mia sang snippets of her drama’s theme song just to torture herself. Maya dramatically pretended to draw Leo as a “fallen hero ruined by technology withdrawal.”

And somehow... despite the cravings, despite the itch to check notifications, they realized something important:

The week wasn’t about losing their phones.
It was about finding each other.

And that was something no app could replace.

Chapter Eleven

The Great DIY Disaster

It was the second-to-last day of the challenge, and boredom was creeping in. They had already played every card game Mia's family owned, eaten through half the snacks in her house, and debated whether Leo's laugh sounded more like a hyena or a malfunctioning blender.

"We need to do something epic," Leo declared, bouncing on the sofa.

"Something future generations will speak of."

"Or something that'll get us grounded," Dev muttered.

Mia's eyes lit up. "I know! A DIY experiment."

Maya groaned. "Please don't say volcano. Everyone does the volcano."

“Exactly,” Mia said proudly. “Which is why we’ll make... a giant slime monster.”

Leo gasped. “YES! A monster that eats socks!”

Dev pinched the bridge of his nose. “I regret being here.”

Since they couldn’t look up instructions on their phones, they had to rely on memory and “common sense”. Which, in their case, was dangerous.

Mia dragged out flour, shampoo, and dish soap. Maya added food colouring. Leo brought glue and glitter. Dev reluctantly contributed a mixing bowl, muttering, “This will not end well.”

They dumped everything in, stirring furiously. The mixture turned into a weird, sticky goop that smelt faintly of lemon cleaner.

“It’s... alive,” Leo whispered dramatically, poking it.

“No, it’s just gross,” Dev said flatly, as the slime clung to his finger like a leech.

Maya cackled. “Perfect! Our monster is born!” She stuck two googly eyes on top.

Five minutes later, the slime monster had taken over half the table.

“Is it supposed to expand like that?” Mia asked nervously.

“Obviously,” Leo said confidently. “It’s evolving.”

“Or it’s going to eat the table,” Dev muttered.

When Leo tried to lift it, the slime slipped through his fingers and splattered onto the floor with a dramatic splat.

“OH NO, IT ESCAPED!” Maya

“OH NO, IT ESCAPED!” Maya

screamed, jumping onto a chair.

“It’s coming for us!” Leo howled, chasing Mia with a dripping blob in his hands.

“Stay back, foul creature!” Mia yelled, wielding a broom like a sword.

Dev just crossed his arms. “Congratulations. You’ve made a mess and a horror movie at the same time.”

Of course, the chaos didn’t end there.

The slime got stuck in Maya’s hair, glitter coated Mia’s shirt, and Leo slipped on the kitchen floor while carrying “Slime-zilla”. He landed flat on his back, waving his arms like an upside-down turtle.

“Leave me behind!” he shouted. “Save yourselves!”

Mia burst out laughing so hard she nearly fell on him. Maya tried to help, but the slime on her hands only made things worse.

Dev finally sighed, grabbed a mop, and began scraping up the mess. “Next time, we’re just making paper boats.”

When they were finally done cleaning, the kitchen looked like a war zone of soap bubbles, glitter, and mysterious sticky puddles.

And yet—all four of them were grinning.

“This”, Maya said, wiping slime off her cheek, “was way more fun than scrolling for hours.”

“See?” Leo said proudly, holding up the one remaining blob of glittery goo. “Our greatest creation!”

Dev raised an eyebrow. “That thing belongs in a toxic waste bin.”

“Don’t listen to him, Slime-zilla,” Leo whispered dramatically, cradling the blob like a baby.

Mia groaned. “We’re never getting the glitter out of this house, are we?”

“Nope,” Maya said cheerfully. “This house is permanently sparkly now.”

And for some reason, that felt just right.

Chapter Twelve

The Final Day

The seventh day of the detox arrived like a boss level in a video game. The kids were proud they'd survived this long, but now the real question hovered over them like a giant “?” in a mystery novel:

What happens when the phones come back?

That morning, Leo made a big announcement at breakfast.

“Ladies and gentlemen, today we prove to history that we are stronger than Wi-Fi!” he declared, standing on a chair like a freedom fighter.

Then the chair wobbled, and he crashed to the floor with a loud thud.

“Starting strong,” Dev muttered.

To celebrate their final day, they decided to host their very own Offline Olympics.

Event 1: Paper Plane Tournament.

Mia’s plane soared gracefully across the room and landed perfectly on the sofa.

Maya got stuck in the ceiling fan and spun around like a helicopter.

Dev’s nose dived straight into Leo’s forehead.

Leo claimed victory by folding his into a “jet fighter” that somehow knocked over a water glass.

Event 2: Blindfolded Pictionary.

Maya drew what was supposed to be a cat but looked suspiciously like a potato with legs.

Mia guessed it correctly anyway, proving her loyalty as a bestie.

Leo drew... something. “Nope,” Dev said immediately. “You didn’t even guess!” Leo complained.

“I don’t need to. That’s clearly cursed.”

Event 3: Balance the Biscuit.

They tried the game where you balance a biscuit on your forehead and wiggle it into your mouth without using your hands.

Mia succeeded. Maya almost choked from laughing. Leo ended up with biscuit crumbs in his hair.

Dev just refused to participate and ate his instead. By the end, their “Olympics” was pure chaos, but the kind that made their stomachs hurt from laughing.

But then evening came. The final countdown.

The phones sat in the drawer, silent, glowing faintly like forbidden treasure.

“Should we... open them?” Mia whispered dramatically, as if she were opening Pandora’s box.

Leo held up a hand. “What if... our phones are mad at us?”

Maya blinked. “Mad?”

“Yeah,” Leo said seriously. “Like, what if they punish us for ignoring them all week? Exploding notifications!

Revenge alarms! Auto-updates of doom!”

Mia facepalmed. “You need help.”

But even Dev, usually calm, felt a weird knot in his stomach. What if they opened their phones and instantly fell back into the black hole of scrolling and silence?

The clock ticked closer to midnight.

Finally, at 11:59, Leo couldn’t take it anymore. He leaped dramatically toward the drawer.

“No, Leo!” Maya shouted, diving after him.

“Resist!” Mia cried, tackling them both.

Dev just stood there, watching the chaos pile up in a heap on the floor. "...You people are ridiculous."

At exactly midnight, they gave up pretending. The drawer opened. The phones lit up like fireworks.

For one frozen second, everyone just stared at their screens. A million missed messages. Endless notifications. Blinking red badges.

And then—

They all burst out laughing.

"Look at this!" Maya giggled, showing her teeth.

"I lost twelve followers because I didn't post for a week.

Tragic!"

"Ha! My cricket team won without me even watching!" Leo cheered.

"My drama got three new episodes," Mia sighed, but she was smiling.

Dev glanced at his. “My inbox has seventy-two unread emails.” He calmly locked the screen again. “Nope. Not today.”

One by one, they tossed their phones back into the drawer.

“Tomorrow,” Mia said.

“Yeah,” Maya agreed. “Let them wait.” “Long live the Offline Olympics!” Leo shouted.
Dev just smirked. “Until Leo breaks something else.”

That night, instead of scrolling, they ended their detox exactly the way they’d lived it: eating leftover snacks, arguing over nothing, and laughing until the neighbour told them to shut up.

And maybe just maybe the phones in the drawer buzzed jealously, wondering what they’d been replaced with.

Epilogue

One Month Later

Life, of course, went back to normal. The phones returned. Notifications returned. Leo was once again glued to cricket updates, Maya was obsessing over her art account, and Mia was bingeing dramas like nothing had changed.

But something had changed.

Because once a week, no matter how busy they were, the four of them still met for their Offline Fridays. No phones. No Wi-Fi. Just chaos.

The first “Offline Friday” was simple—board games and snacks. The second time, they tried baking again (and nearly smoked up Mia’s kitchen).

By the third week, though, Leo got ambitious.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, standing on Mia’s dining table again. “Welcome to the Great Outdoor Adventure! Today, we survive in the wild... without Google Maps!”

“By wild, do you mean the empty lot behind the temple?” Maya asked.

“Yes,” Leo said proudly. “A land of mystery and mosquitoes!”

Mia groaned. “This is going to end badly.”

And it did. Within two hours, Maya had drawn a treasure map that led them in circles, Mia screamed at a frog, Leo got stung by something he insisted was a “killer mutant bug”, and Dev calmly built a makeshift tent out of bedsheets while pretending he wasn’t friends with these three maniacs.

When they finally returned home, sweaty and scratched up, Leo declared it “the greatest adventure of all time”.

Maya was already planning the next Offline Friday.

Mia threatened to bring pepper spray for the “wild”.

And Dev? He muttered, “If we end up on the news one day, I’m not giving interviews.”

But he was smiling when he said it.

The truth was, the offline week hadn’t just ended. It had planted something.

A spark.

A tradition.

A promise that some of the best memories aren’t made on screens—they’re made in the middle of disasters, laughter, and glitter-covered kitchens.

And as Leo dramatically announced the next challenge—something about building a raft without nails—the others knew one thing for sure:

This wasn't the end.

It was only the beginning.

Chapter Thirteen

The Day After

The morning after the detox ended felt... strange.

Mia woke up to the sound of her phone buzzing nonstop on the nightstand. She squinted at the screen—187 new notifications. Group chats, app reminders, random memes, and three missed calls from her aunt.

She stared at it for a long moment. Then she did something shocking.

She turned it over, face down, and went back to brushing her hair.

Meanwhile, Leo was the first to “rejoin civilisation”. He strutted into the café where they’d all agreed to meet, phone glued to his hand, grinning like he’d just reunited with a long-lost best friend.

“Finally!” he announced, sliding into the booth.
“My cricket app missed me. Look at this, guys;
I’ve got ALL the stats!”

He looked up, expecting cheers.

But Maya was doodling in her sketchbook. Dev was sipping tea, eyes half-closed. Mia was flipping through a paperback novel.

“Wait,” Leo blinked. “Where are your phones?”

“At home,” Mia said casually.

“In my bag,” Maya shrugged. “Haven’t checked it yet.”

Dev just smirked. “Why ruin the peace?”

Leo stared at them in horror. “WHAT? You guys aren’t diving back in? Do you have any idea how many memes we’ve missed? How many reels? The algorithm is weeping without us!”

Maya raised an eyebrow. “Pretty sure the algorithm doesn’t care.”

They spent the rest of the day like they had during the detox—chatting, laughing, and playing silly games on napkins with pens. Leo tried at least four times to drag them into watching cricket highlights, but every time, they pulled him back into offline chaos.

At one point, Maya even declared, “Phones are officially banned at this table.” She made Leo put his in his backpack. He sulked like a punished puppy.

“Fine,” he muttered. “But if India loses today, it’s your fault.”

The funniest part came that evening.

Mia’s mom peeked into the living room, where the four of them were sprawled on the floor again, playing charades, and laughing so hard Leo had tears running down his face.

“I thought the detox ended yesterday,” her mom said, confused.

“It did,” Mia grinned. “But... I don’t know. This feels better.”

Her mom smiled softly. “Maybe the best experiments are the ones you don’t stop after the deadline.”

Later that night, as they biked home under the streetlights, Leo finally admitted, “Okay, okay... Maybe one more day without phones isn’t so bad.”

Dev smirked. “Look at that. Leo’s converted.”

“Shut up,” Leo muttered. But he was smiling too. And so, the day after the detox, something unexpected happened:

The challenge ended—but the choice to stay offline, even just a little, didn’t. The story wasn’t over. It was just shifting into something new.

Chapter Fourteen

The Great Scavenger Hunt

By the next weekend, life had mostly slipped back into routine—school, homework, and the constant temptation of glowing screens. But the four friends felt different after their week-long detox. Hanging out offline had become... addictive in its own way.

So when Maya suggested an outdoor adventure, everyone immediately agreed.

“We’ve played every card game we own,” she said, balancing her bike helmet under one arm. “We need something fun. Something real. Something that gets us running around like maniacs.”

Mia gasped dramatically. “You mean... a scavenger hunt?”

Maya grinned. “Exactly.”

Dev groaned. “I can already feel my legs protesting. But fine. I’m in.”

Leo, arms crossed, looked unconvinced. “We’re not five-year-olds, you know.

What’s next? Hide-and-seek?”

Maya shot him a look. “Nope. But if you lose, you’re buying everyone ice cream.”

Leo paused. “...Fine. But only because I like winning.”

The Rules

They sat on a park bench scribbling down the scavenger hunt list in Mia’s notebook. To keep it fair, they all added ideas until the list looked like this:

A rock shaped like a heart ♥

A stranger wearing something yellow (photo proof)

A cafe napkin with the cafe's name printed on it

Something that smells weird

A handwritten note from a shopkeeper

The coolest leaf you can find

A coin older than 2000 A stick taller

than Leo A dog selfie

◆ Bonus: convince a stranger to tell you a joke They split into two teams: **Maya and Leo** vs. **Mia and Dev**. Two hours. No internet, no shortcuts.

Team Maya & Leo

They started at the park. Maya spotted a rock that looked vaguely heart-shaped.

Leo squinted. “That looks like a potato with a dent.”

“Potato-heart,” Maya said firmly, snapping a picture. “Check.”

Next, they saw a jogger in a

neon-yellow T-shirt. Leo, without warning, ran up to him.

“Excuse me, sir! Can we take a selfie with you? It’s for a scavenger hunt!”

The man, sweating heavily, blinked but agreed. Maya almost fell over laughing as Leo posed like he was meeting a celebrity.

Their proudest moment came at a stationery shop. When they asked the shopkeeper for a handwritten note, he looked suspicious.

“What for?” he asked.

“It’s a game,” Maya explained sheepishly.

The man sighed and scribbled, “Study

hard. Don’t be like Leo.”

Maya laughed so hard she nearly dropped the paper. Leo turned red. “HOW does he even know my name?!”

Team Mia & Dev

Meanwhile, Mia and Dev were chaos personified.

For “something that smells weird”, Mia insisted on sniffing things in the local market.

“This spice smells good... this flower smells nice...” she muttered, nose buried in everything. Then she found it: a half-open durian fruit. The smell hit like a brick wall.

“FOUND IT!” she shouted.

Dev gagged instantly. “Please put that back before I faint.”

Later, for the “dog selfie”, they chased a friendly street dog. Mia crouched, phone in hand, while Dev tried to keep the dog still. Instead, the dog licked his face right as the picture was taken. The result: Mia beaming, Dev squinting, and the dog’s tongue covering half the frame.

“Perfect,” Mia said proudly. “That’s art.”

The Race to Finish

With only fifteen minutes left, both teams scrambled.

Maya & Leo found a cafe napkin, then struggled to find a coin older than 2000 until Maya begged a bus conductor. He handed her a 1998 coin with a smile.

Mia & Dev found a stick taller than Leo (Mia dramatically carried it like a flagpole across the street).

The final task the **joke** became the ultimate showdown.

Maya & Leo asked a fruit vendor. He shrugged and said, “Why did the banana go to the doctor? Because it wasn’t peeling well.”

Leo groaned. “That’s the worst joke ever.”

Mia & Dev, on the other hand, struck gold at a bakery. The baker leaned over the counter and whispered:

**“Why did the scarecrow win an award?
Because he was outstanding in his field.”**

Mia nearly fell over laughing. Dev groaned but admitted defeat. “Okay... that’s actually decent.”

The Verdict

Back at the meeting point, they laid out their treasures.

Maya & Leo proudly showed off their potato-heart rock, celebrity jogger selfie, and the legendary “Don’t be like Leo” note.

Mia & Dev countered with their giant leaf, vintage coin, dog selfie, and stink-bomb durian photo.

The vote was unanimous: **Mia & Dev won.**

Leo groaned, digging into his wallet. “Fine. Double scoops for everyone.”

“Triple for me,” Mia added sweetly.

As they walked to the ice cream shop, sticky with sweat but bubbling with laughter, Leo muttered, “Scavenger hunts are ridiculous. And I... may have actually had fun.”

Maya smirked. “Admit it. You loved it.”

“Maybe,” Leo said. “But if another stranger writes a note about me, I’m quitting this group.”

The others roared with laughter, their voices carrying into the evening, as the ice cream shop door jingled open.

Chapter Fifteen

The Outside World

Monday morning felt different. The cafeteria buzzed with students scrolling, filming, and tapping on phones, each absorbed in their own little screens. It was like walking through a room of tiny glowing robots.

Maya, Mia, Dev, and Leo squeezed into their usual table. Phones were in their bags, just as they'd agreed, face down.

"Look at them," Maya whispered, nodding toward a group filming a dance challenge. "They're living in the Matrix."

"They look alive," Dev muttered, "but they're really just... existing." Leo glanced around nervously. "I feel like we've joined some secret resistance against the scroll." Mia laughed. "We basically have." The "No-Phone Club"

By lunchtime, it was clear their table had a new reputation.

One kid leaned over the corner, staring. “Are you... part of some club or something?”

“Uh... yeah,” Leo said before anyone could stop him. “The No-Phone Club. Very exclusive. Strict rules.

Punishments involve dessert.”

The kid blinked. “Dessert?”

“Very serious stuff,” Maya added, nodding sagely.

Word got around faster than anyone expected. By the next day, a few curious classmates hovered near their table, watching them laugh at silly dares, play mini Uno tournaments, and doodle ridiculous comics on scraps of paper.

One afternoon, Mia found a folded note on her desk:

“Can I join your club? I’m tired of staring at my phone all day.”

Maya held it up like a trophy. “See? We’re trendsetters now.”

Dev muttered, “Or a cult.”

Leo waved his hand dramatically. “Either way, I demand tribute.”

Funny Misunderstandings

Being different drew attention, and not all of it was positive.

One teacher thought their laughter was disruptive and asked them to “quiet down”. They protested that they were learning team coordination skills through competitive Uno. The teacher was not convinced.

A classmate assumed Leo’s dramatic reactions were part of a prank video and started filming him secretly. When Leo noticed, he pretended to faint, causing a mini stampede of giggles around the table.

Mia's doodles of geese and potato-heart rocks mysteriously appeared in someone else's notebook. When confronted, she claimed it was "artistic espionage".

Every day brought new small adventures, and the group loved it. They were the weird, chaotic centre in a sea of screen-addicted faces.

A Quiet Pride

One afternoon, as they packed up to leave school, Maya whispered,

"You know... it's kind of amazing. Even if nobody else notices, we actually chose this."

Leo smirked. "Yeah. Who knew rebellion could be so sticky and messy?"

Mia giggled. "And look at us. People are noticing. Maybe even learning something."

Dev shook his head, smiling. “Maybe. Or maybe they’re just watching for the entertainment.”

But it didn’t matter. For once, the glow of screens didn’t control the day. They were present, chaotic, and having fun.

And somehow, that made them feel a little larger than life.

Chapter Sixteen

The Choice

Friday arrived with its usual chaos: the school was alive with gossip, laughter, and—as usual—phones glued to hands.

But today was different. A huge online trend had taken over: a silly dance challenge that half the grade was filming and posting nonstop. The cafeteria was a glowing sea of screens, phones recording, hands swiping, and music blasting from earbuds.

Maya, Mia, Dev, and Leo slid into their usual table. Phones stayed in their bags, face down, but the pull was real.

“Should we... join?” Mia asked, eyes darting to the dancing chaos.

Leo shook his head. “We’d look ridiculous. And besides, we already went viral in our own way—remember the grape vs. forehead incident?”

Dev leaned back and surveyed the room. “Tempting, though. Everyone’s glued to their screens. It’s... alluring.”

A Real Temptation

At that moment, a few classmates noticed them sitting phone-free.

“Why aren’t you guys doing it?” one asked. “You’ll be on TikTok instantly!”

Leo shrugged. “Nah, we’re trying a new trend. It’s called actually living.”

The classmates laughed. One offered to film them anyway.

Maya picked up a napkin, crumpled it into a tiny ball, and flicked it at Leo.

“Play catch. First to miss has to sing a chorus.”

And just like that, the temptation evaporated. They were too busy laughing, dodging flying napkins, and teasing each other to care about going online.

Even as the trend continued around them, with glowing screens everywhere, they weren’t part of it. And for once, it didn’t feel like they were missing out.

Small, Realistic Joys

After school, walking home together, they noticed how different the world seemed. Everyone else’s eyes were down, thumbs moving, and laughs half-hearted.

“Crazy, isn’t it?” Maya said. “They’re all here, but not here.”

Mia nodded. “And we’ve been here, everywhere. Rain, geese, sundae disasters... and still alive.”

Leo laughed. “We’ve had more fun than anyone filming that dumb dance ever will.”

Dev smirked. “Phones aren’t evil. Being boring is.”

They passed a group of students crowded around screens on the sidewalk. One of them called out, “Hey! Come film with us!”

Maya shook her head. “Nah, we’ve got other plans.”

“What plans?” Leo asked, grinning.

“Life,” Mia said simply, tossing a leaf at him.

They laughed, tripping slightly over the kerb in uncoordinated fashion, and didn’t check their phones once.

The Real Ending

They didn't need to be viral. They didn't need likes, comments, or shares. What mattered was laughter that made your cheeks hurt, friends who made even small mishaps unforgettable, and moments you actually remembered.

The world around them kept scrolling, tapping, and swiping. But for these four, the one-week challenge had left a mark. Not a rule, not a lesson—just a habit: to look up, notice, and live.

And maybe, just maybe, that was enough.

Leo glanced at his friends and whispered dramatically, “We’re legends.”

Maya flicked a crumb at him. “Only in our own reality show.” They laughed, messy and loud, as the sun dipped behind the school buildings. And in the glow of the real world—not their screens—life felt perfectly, chaotically theirs.

