

The Humanitarian

Synopsis: When a driver picks up a decorated humanitarian, an unexpected roadblock reveals the character of both men.

“Ry- Ry- Rysh-?” the passenger stammered as he settled into the back seat.

“Rishaan,” the driver interrupted. “I’m Rishaan. How are you tonight?”

Most of Rishaan’s customers sat up front, but occasionally he picked up someone who liked the chauffeur treatment. As long as they weren’t total jerks, he didn’t mind.

“Martinez, huh?” the well-dressed man asked as he scrolled through the driver’s profile on his phone. “You don’t look like a Martinez on the app.”

Rishaan was starting to mind this guy.

The driver turned away to roll his eyes, put the car in gear, and touched the blue start button on his own phone. A female navigation voice began directing Rishaan toward a high-priced hotel. A few minutes passed before he broke the ice.

“So, you look like you just came from a big event,” Rishaan asked.

“Hmm?” the passenger said as he scrolled through email messages.

“The suit. Were you at a wedding or something?”

The navigation system interrupted to advise Rishaan that traffic was backing up at an upcoming roundabout.

“No,” the man replied. “I was being honored at a gala.”

“A what?” the driver asked.

“A gala. I received a humanitarian award.”

“Really? That’s great,” Rishaan said. “How’d you win? Did you save someone? Did you feed homeless people?”

The passenger smirked.

“I just gave a lot of money to a lot of people who did those things.”

Rishaan noticed brake lights ahead of him and he was soon at a standstill as well.

“Oh man,” Rishaan sighed. “Looks like a wreck. Sorry.”

The passenger grunted in frustration.

“So what’s your story, Martinez? Where are you from?”

“Detroit.”

“Ha, good one. I mean where are you REALLY from?”

“Detroit...Michigan?” Rishaan asked.

“No, what ARE you?”

Rishaan knew what the guy was looking for. He just wasn’t sure if he wanted to provide it.

“My dad is Mexican, and my mom is Indian. But now they’re All-American.”

“You’re all legal?” the man asked. “Not many of your kind can say that.”

Rishaan changed the subject. “So tell me more about the award. Did you get a big check or something?”

“No check,” the man replied. “Just this.” He flashed a gold figure of a woman standing on a crystal pedestal, with a large globe in her outstretched arms.

“That’s beautiful,” Rishaan said, genuinely impressed.

“Meh, I have five or six of them. I should really see how much actual gold is in these things.

There might be a fortune gathering dust in my closet. Is the traffic even moving?”

Rishaan tried to see what was happening in the circle.

“Not really. I can’t-”

A sobbing woman ran toward the car.

“What’s going on?” he asked her. “Are you hurt?”

“My daughter! And my mother! They’re trapped in my van!”

Rishaan dialed 911. The passenger recoiled in the back seat, hoping the hysterical woman wouldn't notice him.

After speaking to the emergency dispatcher, Rishaan turned to the back seat. Seeing the cowering man, he rolled his eyes and left the car.

“Hey!” the passenger yelled. “Where are you going?”

Rishaan opened the rear door, offering an opportunity to join him.

The man looked down at his hands.

“Whatever, dude.” Rishaan slammed the door and followed the crying woman. There goes the five-star rating for this ride.

When Rishaan got to the roundabout, he saw two severely damaged vehicles. A pickup truck was hugging a light post while its driver tried to convince the small crowd the accident wasn't his fault. Meanwhile, Rishaan could hear a young, terrified voice crying out for her mother. He ran to the minivan that was resting on its side, and he peeked into the cabin.

“Hello!” He called to the van's occupants. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” the girl's grandmother said. “I think we're okay. Just stuck. What happened?”

“Not sure,” Rishaan said. “But I think the wheels are on the wrong side of your van now.”

The girl stopped crying for a moment, and her grandmother started laughing.

“We called the police and they're coming to help you,” he said calmly.

“Thank you, young man.”

“No problem,” Rishaan smiled at the girl. “I'm Rishaan. What's your name?”

She sniffled a little.

“I'm Rachel.”

“Hey, another R,” he said. “That's awesome!” She smiled back.

“Can you do me a favor, Rachel?” he asked. “Can you try to move your arms and legs?”

Rachel wiggled around in her seat. She didn't have much room to move, but she didn't act like anything hurt.

“Good! How old are you, Rachel?”

“I'm 7,” she said.

“Oh, so you're in college now?”

She giggled.

“Nooo, I'm just in second grade.”

“Oh, okay. Well, can you tell me how much is 3 plus 9?”

“That's easy,” she said. “12.”

“Good! Now how about 12 plus 20.”

“Duh, 32.”

“Excellent! Your grandma must be very proud of you.”

The elderly woman was beaming.

“Yes, I certainly am.”

Sirens had finally made their way through the traffic jam, and a small army of first responders went to work getting the van upright and prying open the metal box. Once freed, the little girl ran to her mother. Rishaan stood nearby, trying to stay out of the way. Rachel looked around and found her new friend.

“Mommy! That's Rishaan! He talked to us in the van. He's really funny!” The mother waved to him with fresh tears in her eyes.

The rest of the ride was silent after the driver returned to his car and made his way to the passenger's hotel.

The humanitarian quietly exited the backseat and gave a short wave of thanks.

Rishaan was about five minutes away from the hotel when a text message popped up on his screen.

“Thank you for your five-star service tonight. I left your tip in the backseat. You deserve it more than I ever will.”

Rishaan adjusted the rearview mirror and saw the reflection of street lights on a figure of gold and crystal.