

The Green Room



N A G M A N I

PROLOGUE

March, 2008.

Shimla.

A soft drizzle fell that night. A dense mist crept down from the mountains to a village that seemed to stand brooding in the valley below. Gloomy dark trees surrounded it, fanning out into the thick forest that ran right up the mountains. A man walked briskly towards the village with a dog at his heels.

Ramesh kept his eyes on the path. Seventeen years had passed since *she* returned. And just when he had begun to assume that it was over, he saw it again.

A pug mark.

He had examined it, hoping it would be a real. He had searched around, praying that he would find a leopard ready to pounce on him. But deep in his heart, he knew that the pug mark was fake. There was no leopard. It was too vague a sign to correlate to his past - but then, the sudden summon to Nainital, a place he had promised himself never to visit again. It was from a stranger named Harry.

Something moved in the trees. The dog barked. Ramesh kept his eyes on the path.

Queen Victoria School, Nainital.

That was where it had begun. This time, he would put an end to it before the torment started, before *she* became powerful again. He thought of his wife, waiting for him not very far away, and his two-year-old daughter. He would not let them suffer for his sin. He felt the talisman tied firmly around his neck. It had worked for the past seventeen years and there was no reason it would fail now. He had decided - he would go to Nainital. He would help.

The barking became furious. Ramesh took the cue and looked up at the trees. There was nothing he could perceive in the dark foliage, yet he was sure that something lurked in there.

Monkeys?

The movement began to grow and he felt surrounded by it. If there were monkeys, there must be at least a thousand of them. He turned around. He could see the mud-path running between dark trees until it was swallowed by the night. High above, the tree-tops swayed gently in a breeze and a few stars peeped through the dark, tattered clouds. The dog barked again and leaped ahead.

“No! Come back!” he shouted and ran after it, but stopped dead when he saw what lay ahead. At first, he thought it was a wall, a massive white wall rising high above the forest canopy. Where on earth did it come from! His jaw dropped the moment he realised its true form. Not more than fifty metres away, a dense mist drifted towards him. It was vast and dark and formidable - an aggressive ocean of vapours that seemed to have materialised out of nowhere. He retreated in fright.

He called out to the dog again. But it ran into the mist and never returned. Cursing, Ramesh pulled out a torch and followed.

The trees began to buzz with life.

He looked up again and still saw nothing. The mist was almost on him. He paused, took a deep breath and boldly stepped into it, and his senses went numb. All he could see was ghastly grey vapours swirling around him. The forest went eerily quiet. He looked back, but the path was lost in the mist. He took another step; and he froze. He had seen something. He narrowed his eyes and looked again. In the storm of vapours, a dark figure stood silently, watching him. His legs jerked backwards, his hands began to tremble, yet he leaned forward for a better look... a girl, and he recognised her only too well. His face contorted into a silent scream.

She was back!

Warm blood rushed down his spine. *She* stood in front of

him, blocking his path, staring through the veil of mist. With a surge of desperation, he turned around and ran. He had to get away from the mist, anyhow, so he ran, and kept running.

The movement in the trees followed.

He tried to call for help, but couldn't summon the strength to shout. All that came out from his mouth were whimpers of helplessness. And then, he tripped over something and fell. He tried to get up, but fear had crippled him, and he fell again. He looked back. The mist inched closer. So he began to crawl.

The trees mocked.

He heard the dog bark. But the sound came from somewhere far away, maybe from a distant mountain or maybe from a different world. He tried to call for it, but only managed to splutter instead. Then, he saw it again, right in front of him. It was the second time since the phone-call. It couldn't be a coincidence.

Another pug mark.

The past came swirling back. That cruel night. That dark cave. Those abandoned barrels.

Ramesh began to cry. His limbs were numb with fear. He clutched his talisman and mustering all his courage and strength, got to his feet. And then, lightning struck, illuminating what lay hidden in the foliage.

His eyes saw them, his legs retreated from them, his hands shielded his face from them, yet his mind protested to acknowledge their existence.

Hundreds of men and women sat on the trees!

The lightning died and the trees went back into darkness. But the sight lingered. He could feel their ghostly eyes on him.

Then came a growl from the mist - a raspy, short growl, but cunningly long enough to confirm its existence and freeze his heart.

Seventeen years, and he still recognised it. It still chilled his blood. He backed away from the mist; he backed away from the trees. His knees could no longer support him and he fell off the path and rolled down the slope into the forest. The

talisman fell from his grasp as he landed into a pool of wet mud. Spitting out bits of grass and twigs, he scrambled on his fours. A few feet away the land fell down to his village and then to a vast valley beyond. He saw lights flickering in the centre of the village - the temple. Towards the east, there was a lone bulb at the edge of the market - his house. He cried for help, but his throat was dry. The village didn't hear his silent moans, but the people in the trees did. The black canopy of trees burst into whispers. He saw hundreds of faces peeping through them. He tried to crawl out of the mud, muttering prayers to every deity he worshipped.

A pair of yellow eyes appeared from behind a tree trunk. They watched him for a moment and vanished.

The whispers grew into an excited chatter.

The eyes appeared again, this time closer.

He flailed his hands madly to crawl away, tears washing away the dirt on his face.

The eyes circled him, coming closer every time they appeared. Something growled, and Ramesh collapsed with fright. Something moved. For the briefest moment, he saw black spots on yellow coat. He reached for his amulet, but it was gone. A deep ringing jangled in his ears.

Something came closer.

Something crouched.

Something bared its fangs.

Something pounced.

With a yelp, he tried to shield himself with his hands but they were no protection; with a crack they gave away under the immense weight of something. He felt rough fur on his face. He saw anger in those yellow eyes. Then, he felt burning pain as fangs ripped open his body. His insides lay scattered around him. The world began to fade. The trees began to disappear. He knew he was dying. Then why were those faces becoming clearer? And there *she* stood by a ghastly trunk, watching him...

1.

THE RESOURCE ROOM

September, 2008.

Queen Victoria School, Nainital.

It was a starry night. A sweet breeze came through the window as Rohan Agarwal watched the front quadrangle from the Class XI's dormitory. He had been on the watch for over two hours and could now safely assume that the night guards had retired to their rooms. There was no time to waste. He had to go down, break into the Warden's Office and search for the question papers of the Unit Tests starting in two days.

He picked up a book, put on a woollen cap and went down to the first floor. At the end of a dimly lit corridor lined with wooden panels, he saw two students studying under a light. Somewhere, a clock chimed three.

One of them came forward. He was tall and shabby, and like Rohan, he was still in uniform. His blue and black striped tie of Edward House hung loose about his neck. "The warden is asleep!" said Ayush Roy. "Or watching porn. But either way, he is busy in his house!"

"What's with the guards?" asked Manav Singh. He was in Leopold House and was currently wearing a navy blue jersey to conceal his night-suit in case someone spotted them.

Rohan just nodded. In front of him, a door led to the landing of a staircase which went down to the classrooms and offices. He stood on the landing and studied another door to his right. It was white with the word 'WARDEN' embedded on it. He stood listening for some time. A clock ticked continuously beyond. He walked to the door, and then slowly and carefully,

bolted the latch from outside.

“Damn it! You’ll wake him up!” Rohan whispered as the wooden staircase groaned under the weight of the three boys. But there was nothing they could do to keep that ancient staircase from complaining, so they ran down as swiftly as possible and stepped out into a lobby. Rohan held his breath and listened. He heard footsteps from the dormitories above. They were moving away from them and died eventually. Ayush looked at him, his round face gleaming with excitement. Rohan nodded in return.

Ayush and Manav began strolling up and down a deserted corridor between classrooms, immersed in the books they had been carrying. Though nobody usually took to the corridors at 3:00 AM to study, as leaving the dormitory was prohibited after 11:00 PM, it would not have been much of an issue if they were seen. They were just three studious kids working hard to get good grades.

Rohan went out to the quadrangle and observed a small room at the end of the outer corridor. There was no movement inside. He coughed deliberately. Still nothing. He peeped through a window and saw two men in uniform wrapped in blankets, and he smiled. He latched the door from outside and returned to his friends.

The question papers were usually typed and formatted by some staff in the Warden’s Office, which was practically a small cubicle next to the reception of the Principal’s Office. Earlier that day, Rohan had walked into the suite when the reception was empty, on the pretext of meeting the warden. The door to his office was dark and old, with a heavy lock dangling from it. There was no point trying to break through as the lock was impossible to pick. He was about to give up and return when he noticed a window behind the chairs in the visitors’ lounge. It would certainly be closed at night, but he had worked a way in.

Manav took out a torch and pointed it at a polished black door with the word ‘PRINCIPAL’ embossed across it in golden. Next to the door was the reception counter and behind

it was the door to the Warden's Office. "Here!" Rohan led them across the lounge to the window. Ayush pulled out a small screw-driver, picked from the carpenter's room earlier that day, and began scraping hardened clay off the window-pane. The glass came out within minutes. Rohan put his hands in, unbolted the window and scrambled inside.

The office was small and congested. He looked around. There were more chairs than it could accommodate. An old computer sat beside the door. He listened for any sound from outside. Everything was quiet. He could almost hear his heartbeat. "The drawer..." he whispered to Ayush, glad to have broken the deepening silence. He himself began searching through innumerable files on a desk. There were articles for the school magazine, applications, bills, forms and few photographs of students; but no question paper. Manav was busy searching another desk behind him.

"Maybe the papers haven't been printed yet," Ayush whispered.

"Maybe," Rohan pointed towards the computer. "Switch it on."

"They usually have a password." Ayush looked at him indecisively.

"Boot it in 'Safe-Mode'," Manav instructed. "Use *admin* or *administrator* for user-id and leave the password blank. If it runs on XP, you will be able to browse files at least."

Ayush didn't seem convinced, yet he switched it on and pressed F8. "*Admin*" he spoke out as he typed and pressed *Enter*. The welcome screen of Windows XP appeared and filled the room with blue light. He raised his hands and screamed silently in triumph; and then came forth the start-up tune like thunder.

Ayush froze, his hands still held high. Rohan could now see blue LEDs of a music-system under the computer. He listened intently, expecting knocks from the guard-room. They had locked the guards and the warden, yet they had done nothing about the Principal's Office, which was actually an extension of his house and could be locked only from inside.

Minutes passed and all he heard was the slow breathing of his friends. The office was heavily carpeted and so packed that it swallowed any disturbance from outside. Rohan had an unsettling feeling about it all. If someone came to check, they wouldn't have heard. He quickly ran to the corridor and ducked in front of the guard-room and listened. He could hear their faint snoring.

Just as he turned to leave, his eyes caught a movement across the quadrangle. He had been squatting under a bulb, clearly visible to anyone. He stepped away from the light and scanned the area. If someone had seen him, there was no point running. But he had to make sure he did not lead anyone to his friends. The quadrangle was bounded by a parapet on its front and the Chapel on its right. Before the entrance to the Chapel stood the Chapel-Bell and it was there he had seen someone. A tree grew on the other side of the Chapel and stooped over it to cast its branches over the Bell. All he saw was the branches swaying in a breeze. A trick of shadows!

Rohan returned to the office. Ayush had been typing in keywords in the search box, but nothing relevant was found.

"Guys, look!" Manav whispered and held out a few bundles of coupons, which circulated around the school in place of cash.

"How many are there?" Ayush asked, a wicked smile spreading over his face.

"About fifteen. They were just lying under these files."

"So?" They looked at each other.

"That should be five bundles each," Ayush announced.

"Five hundred bucks!" Manav exclaimed. One hundred was their weekly pocket-money.

"Yup! Baby, you're a rich man!" Ayush winked as Manav stuffed the bundles into his pockets.

Rohan could not help but smile. The venture was not an utter disappointment after all. And with a penny more luck, they could even find the question papers.

They didn't.

Half-an-hour later they jumped out of the window.

Rohan put the glass back in place and sealed it with fresh clay, which again had disappeared from the carpenter's room. Then, making sure they had left no trace of their break-in, they pulled the curtains back and left. Rohan unlatched the guard-room and then the warden's house on their way back. There was huge disappointment for anyone who had stayed up for them. Rohan immediately went to his bed to avoid being questioned. They didn't find the papers, but on the other hand, they were lucky enough to not have been seen doing so.

A man stood smoking by the Chapel Bell. He was gazing at the distant chain of dark mountains, lost deep in thought. And how surprised he was to see a student walk right out into the quadrangle and boldly latch the guard-room!

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There was a lot of excitement in the class the following morning, catalysed by Manav's girlfriend, Nisha Gupta, who made him narrate every minor detail again and again to make sure other girls envied her. They had Maths test the next day and most of the teachers had given free classes to support them in their preparations, but Rohan spent the time trying to catch a nap, which only proved futile. After lunch, he headed straight to the dormitory. The Head-Boy, Hemant Sharma, had announced a Dramatics Society meeting after lunch and since he was a member, it meant he would be losing another precious hour. He thought it was better to utilise the time sleeping. But the pressure of test was mounting and sleep did not come.

It was evening and Rohan sat on a concrete bench behind the Library trying to study. He desperately needed some sleep. His plan to leak the papers had backfired. Not only did he have tons of chapters to study by morning, his weary mind rendered all his efforts fruitless. He had almost given up hope when Varun Kumar, his classmate, strolled in. He was in Alfred House, or A.F., and had a square face and short hair. "Hey!" he beamed at Rohan. "Why weren't you at the meeting?"

"What meeting?" Rohan asked. And then he remembered.

“The Dramatics Society. And guess what?” Varun said, his smile getting wider under his crooked nose. Rohan replied with an uninterested look. “This December, we are going to perform a play in Delhi!”

“Wow! That’s cool!” Rohan now knew what he had been beaming about. Varun had been performing on stage since Junior School, and if the school was planning another play, he would certainly be given a role. And considering that this time the play was to be performed outside, with probably hundreds of important personnel and alumni in the audience, Varun was doing a good job keeping his excitement just to a smile. “So, when exactly is this play?” Rohan asked, genuinely interested.

“Around Christmas. The exact date is yet to be fixed.”

“That’s great! So, you guys will be staying here all through December!” The winter break started in the first week of December, which meant that the play party would have the entire school to themselves for almost half a month. For most of the Junior School boys, this could have been the worst nightmare, but for seniors, getting stranded in the school with friends was as much a fantasy as getting stranded in an imaginary place with imaginary voluptuous girl(s).

“Yeah! But I have to get through the audition,” Varun replied, sitting on the railing. “By the way, we are doing the Wizard of Oz and I have been called to play the Tin Woodman.”

“The Wizard of Oz... it’s about that girl... Dorothy, right?”

“Yes,” Varun replied. “Dorothy Gale.”

Rohan had heard about the story long ago. It was about a girl who finds herself in a strange Land of Oz after a cyclone swept her house away. The house falls on a wicked witch and kills her. She is then told by a good witch to follow the ‘Road of Yellow Bricks’ to the ‘Emerald City’ and visit an old wizard who could tell her a way to return home. On her way, she meets the Tin Woodman, the Cowardly Lion and the Scarecrow. Dorothy Gale. And then it dawned upon him that she was the main character of the play and he knew exactly who would be given her role.

He was in fifth standard when he first saw her and the mountains had lost their charm since then. Yes, she was beautiful, outshining even the stars spread across the sky; and like the stars, over the years, he had looked up to her and admired her, yet not as much as spoken to her. She belonged to a different world, that was what his mind said, and she could never be his. He could shout and scream and attempt to reach out for the stars, but eventually, he would fall back, hurt, while they mocked down at him. But this silly heart, when has it followed logic? And his... it always skipped a beat even at the slightest glimpse of her.

“Hey guys!” Ayush appeared around a corner of the Library, a lollipop in his mouth.

“You know what,” Rohan turned to him. “This guy has been called for...”

“Yeah, I know,” Ayush cut in. “Now shut up and listen. The papers are kept in the Resource Room.”

“What Resource Room?” Varun asked. Rohan himself had never heard of it.

“It is a small chamber in the Accounts Section. They have recently converted it to store question papers,” Ayush answered.

“Chamber? What chamber?” asked Rohan. A wave of excitement drowned his sleep and his mind began to race. “What is this school...? Hogwarts?”

“Mrs. Sharma told me about it. She was at the meeting and...”

“And why would she tell you about it?” asked Varun.

“Because I just raised my hand and I was like, Ma’am, this is to bring into your notice that a few boys are finding it very difficult to locate the question papers and that these particular boys would be highly obliged if you could kindly tell them so.” He stared at Varun to express his disappointment. “Of course, she just mentioned it in passing.”

“And how do you intend to break in?” retorted Varun.

“Well, the keys are in the Vice-Principal’s Office, most probably.”

“And how will you break into *his* office?” asked Rohan.

“Manav is taking care of that,” answered Ayush. Manav had promised Nisha that he would bring the papers. Paper or no paper, they would have certainly scored decent marks, but there was something more important at stake.

“So, guys,” said Varun. “I think I no longer need to study now. Bring the paper and we’ll have it solved by morning. Besties you guys and thanks in advance!”

“And by the way,” Ayush yawned, baring his yellow molars, “Manav will be playing the Cowardly Lion and I am in charge of lights and sounds. And Ma’am wanted to see you. Now I am going to sleep.”

Rohan followed Ayush to his dormitory for a nap, feeling more at ease now, and drowsy. Mrs. Sharma could wait. He was too tired to do anything. He had just got into his bed when a junior appeared at the door. “May I come in? The warden is calling you to the Staff-Room.”

Rohan felt as if he had just gulped molten iron. “What? Me?” He could not believe it. “Why?” The junior shrugged and tried to make an innocent face, certainly aware that he was the bearer of some terrible news.

“Who else was with him?” Rohan asked, desperately trying to make some sense out of it.

“There was a guard in the room, and...”

“And who else?”

“....no one else.”

Rohan knew he could never sleep again. So, someone had been there by the Chapel the previous night. He had been seen. But why hadn’t the guards caught him red-handed? The junior saw the passing expressions on his face and concluded it was better to leave him to his misery and hurriedly walked out. Rohan put on his shoes and went down to the Staff-Room. He had decided to simply deny all accusations. He would have a rough episode with the warden, but eventually the matter would be taken to the principal. He would simply make up some story then, something about having a quarrel with a drunken guard a few days back and insisting that they

were just accusing him to show who the boss was. Of course, anyone from his class could come up as a witness. And he could always argue that they had just made it up because had they actually seen him, they would have caught him red-handed.

The warden, Mr. Kapil Kumar, a tall, slim, swarthy man in his late thirties with curly hair forcefully combed back, was busy scribbling something in his diary. A guard stood by a window, lost in thought. Rohan paused to settle his blue striped tie and put on a puzzled look. "You called me, Sir?"

The warden looked up from his work and eyed his shoes for a moment, his pointed nose sniffing something... probably menace. A pair of unpolished shoes was a *crime* big enough for detention. He was probably thinking of the best way to present the *crime* committed the previous night into a *file* so as to make the *case* as strong as possible. Rohan tried to stay calm and maintain ignorance as the guard studied him.

"Yes," Mr. Kumar finally replied and returned to his work. "Mrs. Sharma wanted to see you."

Rohan felt a wave of relief sweep over him. He tried hard not to smile or get away too quickly. "Err... Sir, where is she?" he asked in the politest tone possible.

"In one of the classrooms. Just look around." The warden replied and waved his hand to leave.

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In spite of his drowsiness, Rohan was glad they were going to try again that night. He hadn't been able to study or sleep at all. He was too excited. Mrs. Sharma had appointed him the manager of the play! His job would be to arrange for practice sessions, take care of props and costumes and most importantly, actively participate in advertisement and fund raising campaigns. This came as a bit of a surprise to him as these tasks were generally carried out by the senior most members of the Society, but who cared! It was only *she* he had been thinking about for the rest of the evening. He had not even bothered to ask his two friends about their plan for

the night.

She was in Class XII, the girls' House-Captain of Leopold. Spending the last of her school days with her was more than Rohan could ever ask for. But what after she left? He had become so used to her presence that he dreaded to even think about it. He lay in his bed the entire evening, while others studied, imagining and reimagining what it would be like to work with her.

It was past midnight and after hours of careful watch, Rohan, Ayush and Manav had succeeded in locking the warden and the guards. They were again in the long corridor trying to peep through the dark windows of the Accounts Section fended by heavy wooden doors. In the darkness they could only make out a small waiting room with wooden chairs installed on either side. There were three white doors on the other end. The one on the left led to the Dean's Office and the one on the right opened into the Accounts Office. It was the middle door Manav was pointing a torch at.

"This is the room Mrs. Sharma was talking about," whispered Ayush.

"Okay. Now let's get the key!" Manav headed for the Vice-Principal's Office which was a little way down the corridor, facing the Staff-Room. It too had an old, white, polished door. Two rows of glass slabs were framed above the door and above them, another single frame that could be opened, ran across the breadth. It served as a ventilator and was, currently, closed. The glass beneath this ventilator was broken.

"How did that glass break?" Rohan asked.

"Threw a ball through it this evening," Manav replied.

"And where is the ball?"

"It's still in there." Rohan looked at him in alarm. "Chill! Anybody could have broken it. Juniors are always playing around here. Now let's get some chairs."

"Why? To crawl through the ventilator?" Rohan asked sarcastically.

"Yes."

"Really!" Rohan looked up at the ventilator. Even if

one of them did manage to slide through, there was still the problem of landing on the other side while keeping all bones intact. "But who is going through?"

"You," was the reply.

Ayush and Manav brought two chairs from the Staff-Room and placed them right before the door. Rohan was still searching for words to defend himself, looking at the ventilator and then at his friends. "Now up you go!" said Manav, standing on a chair. Ayush put his arm through the broken glass and began searching for bolts on the other side.

"What? Crawl through the ventilator? Are you insane?"

"Oh, please! Now don't waste time and climb up."

"I am not going in!" Rohan protested, looking at Ayush for support.

Ayush seemed uninterested in the conversation. He finally opened the ventilator and signalled Rohan to climb up. Having no option, Rohan pulled himself up and forced his torso through the gap. It was larger than it had appeared and with the other two holding his legs, he began to slither through, lowering himself hands down on the other side, his body stiff with pain. He grabbed onto any gap or projection he could find to keep his weight away from his shins.

"Okay, stop!" he said and grabbed a handle on the door. His eyes had become accustomed to the darkness in the office and his outstretched hands were no more than three feet from the ground. Remembering that there were pieces of broken glass on the floor, he took off his pullover and threw it down. "Let go!" he whispered and the others loosened their grip. He fell on his outstretched hands, tucked in his head and rolled over on the pullover. He switched on a light and looked around.

A large, magnificent table stood at the centre with a matching chair. A name-plate, with the words *Mr. D. K. Roy, Vice-Principal* sat on the table beside an antique pen-stand. The walls were decorated with trophies. Rohan's eyes fell on a wooden board hung in a corner behind the table. Bunches of labelled keys hung on it and he soon found a lot with

‘ACCOUNTS’ tag. “Here!” He threw it and all other bundles through the ventilator.

“Okay now. Stay inside. We’ll come back once we get the papers,” Manav instructed.

The room became strangely quiet after they left. Rohan walked around the room for some time and spotted the tennis ball in one of the corners. He sat on the chair and began aimlessly observing the room. A few old school magazines lay on the table. He picked up one. It was a quarterly magazine of the year 1989. He opened it and began going through its black and white photos. The first few pages contained pictures of the annual Fete. There were pictures of teachers and students behind their stalls, another of two men in suit trying their luck on a Wheel-Of-Fortune, captioned *Mr. A. S. Williams with his brother Mr. E. S. Chapman*. The principal, Mr. Williams was in his sixties and had a strict face and grey, balding hair. He flipped through the pages and saw another picture of the two men standing on a stage with a crew of students in costumes. It appeared that Mr. E. S. Chapman was the director of an annual play the school put up every Founder’s Day.

Then there was this picture, rather the person in the picture that caught his attention. It was of two girls standing next to their *Treasure Hunt* stall. The one on the left was unrealistically beautiful. He gazed at her in awe. Her beauty almost pinched him. Her hair was parted on one side and combed back. She was thin, almost fragile, and wore a pair of simple black-frame spectacles that made her look sincere and intelligent. She was smiling, and adding it to her intense gaze, it appeared as if she was actually watching the person looking at her picture.

Realising that he had been staring at her for too long, he turned the page. The magazine then switched to articles and Rohan found himself turning back to the picture of the two girls. It had no caption. And before realising it, he was turning through the pages for any other reference of her. And he found another in one of the articles. She was in a few pictures of the girls’ basketball team. *K. Khanna*. She was in 11th grade that

year. Rohan felt an unusual throb in his heart. They at least had some connection. She would probably be a mother now, living happily with the love of her life. He began to search through the pages again.

There were hurried movements outside the office. He stood up, alert. "Rohan!" he heard Ayush call out.

"Got the papers?" Rohan asked excitedly.

"No. There's a problem!"

"What?"

"That Resource Room... it has a..."

"Wait!" Manav whispered. Then there was jingling of keys and a few seconds later the door swung open. "Come and look!" Manav said.

"What happened?"

"We opened the Accounts Section," Ayush went on to explain as they walked towards it. "But there was no key to the Resource Room. Instead we found one to the Dean's Office. We raided it and found another key in a drawer, and there it is..." They had reached the Resource Room. It was open. Ayush pointed his torch at a brand-new steel cupboard inside. It had two additional, high-quality latches installed below its handle with heavy locks over them. "Now, we don't have keys for that!" Ayush concluded.

"Mrs. Sharma didn't cover this part, did she?" Manav taunted.

"It might be in the Dean's Office," suggested Rohan.

"Nope! We have searched. It's not there."

Rohan looked around the room. It was small and dark. A Xerox machine stood in a corner. "That's where they make copies of the papers," he murmured.

"I think I'm gonna fail!" mumbled Manav.

"More importantly," Rohan said as he walked towards the machine, "*Nisha* is going to fail!"

Manav threw him an intense look, but it was lost in the darkness. Rohan went closer to the machine and in the light of the torch, he saw a basket overflowing with crumpled and torn sheets of paper. "What's this!" he exclaimed and

picked up a sheet. The heading on top said that it was Unit IV English question paper for Class VII. However the print was misaligned. “Hey! These are discarded copies of the question papers!” Rohan felt his excitement soar.

Ayush and Manav ran to him, and without wasting a moment, they began searching the pile. Soon, Manav had found their own English paper. It was crumpled too and the print ran off the page, but there was no problem in understanding the questions. Within ten minutes under shining luck, they had found all other papers. They put the remaining sheets back in the basket and locked all the rooms they had opened. Rohan went inside the Vice-Principal’s Office and Ayush locked the door and threw in the keys through the ventilator. Rohan put them back in their place and grabbed the pullover Ayush threw in. The two boys pulled him till he got hold of the ventilator frame and then he pulled himself up. Ayush stood on the chairs and supported him while Manav climbed down and helped him descend. They put the chairs back in the Staff-Room and unlocked the guards and the warden. Most of the boys were waiting for them. It was the silence of the night that kept them from screaming till the mountains came down.

By 6 AM everyone had the solution. It was decided that nobody would attempt more than they usually did. Rohan, Ayush and Manav were excluded. The papers were leaked to save them the labour of preparation and not get unrealistic marks, which would certainly make the teachers suspicious. The girls could get the paper only after breakfast as their hostel was outside the school’s main campus. They only had fifteen minutes to go through it, and Nisha utilised that time hugging Manav and at one point, she pecked him on his cheeks which resulted in so much hooting from the boys that invigilators came inside before schedule to kill the commotion.

2.

THE PIANO

“**E**yes on the *ball*, damn it!” screamed Ayush.

Rohan quickly looked away from the balcony, but too late, he missed the ball again. He had spent over an hour in front of a mirror, combing his hair again and again and yet again and it only seemed to worsen each time. And just when he was all set to head for the Auditorium, he was informed about a football match, Edward House, E.D., versus Leopold House, L.P. Cursing, he changed into his football-kit and went to the Field. He didn’t want to miss the audition. The match started but he couldn’t take his eyes off the balcony. The audition had begun and students were strolling on the balcony, two storeys above the Field, with scripts in their hands while some merely watched the match, blue and yellow waves chasing a white sphere. He had spotted Nisha, but *she* wasn’t there.

The match went on. Clusters of students watched from the Stadium Steps, occasionally cheering for their house. It was a pity sight as compared to school matches when it was compulsory for every student to watch and participate in organised cheering. Students of Class XI led this cheering, punishing anyone who refused to shout and cheer at their command. The mountains echoed with their shouts and slogans and drums. But Rohan did not need spectators to cheer him. All he wanted was one person watching him from the balcony. No team scored in the first half. But with a sudden change of luck, L.P. scored within five minutes into the second half. The match intensified.

Five minutes were left. Chances of winning seemed bleak for E.D. In a fresh wave of attacks, Rohan received the ball

and took it along the left line, making full use of his speed to outrun L.P's defence and passed it to the right wing, which had come inside the penalty area. L.P's backs had come running and tried to deflect the ball in mid-air. But the pass was perfectly manoeuvred. The right wing kicked the ball inside. A back projected himself in between, and the ball hit his hand.

There was a great deal of hooting from the spectators as the referee blew a whistle. A penalty! More students and even Junior School teachers, who taught Class III to Class V students, were watching the crucial moments of the match. Rohan knelt on the field as the right wing, Gurpreet Singh, who was also E.D. football captain, tapped his boots on the ground. The goal-keeper hopped at the centre of the goal. Ayush, who played as the centre back, was sitting in the middle of the field. Rohan's eyes fell on the balcony again. A mist was falling over the Field, making it difficult to make out the faces.

The goal-keeper came forward and took his position. Rohan would have been more at ease had not the L.P. goal-keeper been awarded the best goal-keeper in the football tournament the previous year. Rohan looked up again. Manav had joined Nisha. But there was no sign of *her*. He scanned the other students standing along the balcony railing. No one was interested in their scripts now; all eyes were glued to the Field.

There was a yelp as the goal-keeper dived. The football changed its trajectory and spun out of his reach. Singh let out a roar and jumped into the air. He had scored. The team patted him and ran back to take positions. Minutes later, a whistle indicated the end of the match. It was a draw.

Rohan quickly went to the Auditorium hoping to catch up with the leftover part of the audition. He opened the door and stepped onto the aisle. There was no one in the hall. Rows and rows of green chairs spread out on either side. The walls were covered with brown boards displaying the names of past Head-Boys and Head-Girls and recipients of various

awards. An old piano sat in a corner in front of the stage. He had missed it. But just as he was about to leave, he heard some voices in the Green Room, which was a suite of three small rooms beneath the stage. The first room was the waiting room with a changing room to its left and a make-up room to its right. Adjacent to the make-up room was a small toilet and a door that opened at the top of a spiral staircase which ran down to an alley at the edge of a forest, connecting the Basketball Court and the Field.

Climbing down the stairs to the Green Room, Rohan saw a young woman, probably in mid-twenties, in black sweater and tight blue jeans in the middle of a narrow corridor. She was looking at him, her eyes heavy with kohl, her hair sparsely highlighted. Mrs. Sharma, a respectfully fat lady with round face, small eyes and burgundy hair, was standing at the door to the waiting room.

“And here is...” Mrs. Sharma raised her hand as soon as he came in view. And then, he spotted a girl behind her. She was in a grey skirt and green blazer with the words ‘HOUSE CAPTAIN’ embroidered on her badge in golden. She was leaning against a wall, her dark and silky hair carefully tied back, her sparkling eyes casually looking at him. His heart skipped a beat and his legs... a step. She swirled by... He heard someone gasp. A sudden pain shot through his chest; and the next moment he was breathing in dirt on the floor.

“Oh boy! Oh boy!” Mrs. Sharma came forward. “Watch your step!”

Rohan jumped to his feet, and almost bumped into her. With his face burning, he passed her an embarrassed smile. He felt idiotic, covered in dirt from head to toe. He looked back at the staircase as if it had deliberately pushed him.

“As I was saying...” Mrs. Sharma turned to the young woman. “And here is Rohan Agarwal. He will be assisting you with this play.”

Rohan gave another smile, trying not to look at the girl behind her.

“And she is Miss Anjali Kapoor, your new director.”

“Hello, Rohan!” Anjali Kapoor held out a hand.

“Hello...” he said midway rubbing dirt off his knees.

“Manners... Mr. Agarwal!” Mrs. Sharma cut in.

“Oh sorry! Good evening... err... Anj...”

“...Ma’am,” Mrs. Sharma put in.

“Poor baby!” Anjali chuckled and put a hand over her mouth. “Never mind! You can call me Anjali!”

Rohan threw a glance at the girl leaning against the wall. Chandni Joshi was giggling and how he wanted to curl up and die!

“So,” Mrs. Sharma continued, “if you will excuse me, I will leave you to our students.” She shook hands with Anjali and made for the stairs. “And you, Rohan, select two assistants. And be here on time tomorrow!”

“I had a match,” Rohan defended, but she was gone.

Anjali went inside the waiting room. Manav was sitting on the floor with Nisha. They stood up the moment she entered. The room was damp and cold. Heaps of old costumes and props lay scattered on the floor. “What’s with all these costumes? Will they just lie here?” Anjali asked.

“No,” Manav replied immediately. He was slightly taller than Rohan and bulkier. He was wearing his yellow house T-shirt. His hair was neatly combed back. “Rohan will have them removed.”

Rohan glared at him, but he was right. These were the leftovers of the previous play and as the manager, he would have to get the Green Room cleaned up.

“And this is your make-up room!” Anjali went inside and looked around. Mirrors were installed on two adjacent walls and a single old, wooden chair sat in front of them. “This place seems very old, doesn’t it?”

“Yes it is! Our school is one-fifty-three years old.” Nisha said abruptly in an unusual high pitch voice. She was in Alfred House, A.F. Her red T-shirt perfectly suited her fair skin and brownish hair. Boys had made fun of her voice when she first joined the school in class VI. It continued for weeks before they got bored and moved on to someone else. But as years

passed, her voice became bold and commanding and merged flawlessly with her personality. "And you know what, people even believe that this Green Room is haunted!"

"Haunted?" Anjali looked questioningly at her. Nisha had certainly got her attention. She dug her hands deep into her pockets, revealing an inch of her waist, and waited for Nisha to continue.

"Well, people have seen a girl roaming around in the Auditorium."

Chandni took off her hair-band and put it on her wrist. Then folding her arms and leaning against a wall, she looked at Nisha with pity. Rohan smiled, and their eyes met. She smiled back, welcoming him to mock Nisha with her. It was the closest interaction he ever had with her.

"She wears an old uniform," Nisha continued, "pale white face, dark shadows around her eyes. She is often seen sitting on this very chair. And it is said that the chair is always found in front of the mirror no matter where you leave it."

Rohan looked at the chair. It was indeed in front of the mirror.

"And do you believe in these stories?" Anjali was observing her.

"I don't know!" Nisha shrugged.

"There is a story associated with every building in this school," Chandni interrupted. "And if you believe the villagers, even these mountains are swarming with ghosts. You cannot go around spreading this nonsense."

"Yes," Manav joined in. "Once a guard heard boys hooting and cheering in the Squash Court, as if a match was going on..." Manav paused and Anjali raised her perfectly dressed eyebrows, "...in the middle of a night!" He looked around, impressed with himself for coming up with such an interesting story. All he received was a momentary glare from Nisha before she turned her head away as a clear indication of ignoring him.

"And what do you have to say about these stories?" Anjali abruptly turned to Rohan.

"Yeah," Rohan was completely taken unaware. His eyes immediately darted away from her exposed waist and settled on the golden highlights of her hair. "I mean... no. They are just lame stories - spiced up versions of something weird that might have happened years ago." Rohan saw a playful look on her face. She was not serious about this at all. She was completely enjoying her tour and listening to the students speak their minds. "I don't believe in them," he concluded.

"Really? So you are not scared of coming here alone?" asked Nisha.

"I *have* been here alone many a time!"

"That is impressive!" said Anjali and moved closer to him, a bit too close. Rohan stepped back. "Then answer me Rohan. We will be starting night practices soon, and if I ever need to come down here, *alone*, and ask you to accompany me - will you?"

What was that?

Manav turned around to giggle while Nisha tried to figure out the correct motive behind the question. Chandni, whose eyes had shot up momentarily, began to fondly gaze at the white walls of the room. Anjali crossed her arms and watched him blush. Had she seen him stare at her waist and was making him suffer for it?

"Even if you wake me up in the middle of a night and ask me to come, Ma'am, I will be there for you!" Rohan replied.

Anjali laughed and patted him. She moved on to explore other rooms. Rohan saw Manav and Nisha exchange grins. They were cooking up something. "Anyone can come down here in broad daylight," Nisha said flatly.

Rohan looked at Manav for explanation. He simply shrugged and looked away. "So?" he asked.

"If you really don't believe in these stories, what about coming here at night? Tonight - what say?"

"I would rather spend my night sleeping." Rohan turned to follow Anjali.

"How about this, I will leave my pullover here. You have to come here at night to get it. And I'll remove this chair for

you,” she dragged the chair out of the room. “See for yourself where you find it. You hand back my pullover tomorrow, and I will treat you in the Canteen.”

“Not interested.”

“Why? What happened? Scared?”

“You are asking me to come all the way down here at night?”

“Yes, I am. That shouldn’t be a big deal, you guys have had many...” she broke off and bit her lips as Rohan glanced at Anjali in the changing room. She seemed completely unaware of their conversation.

Rohan thought about it. Coming all the way down from his dormitory was extremely crafty. He would surely be expelled if caught in the act – *hammered* first, then expelled. He felt Chandni’s eyes on him. He turned. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments before she started fiddling with her finger-nails, completely uninterested in his reply.

“Fine then, I accept your dare!”

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It was 2:00 AM when Rohan peeped through a window. Stars twinkled in a moonless sky and the lamp-posts in the deserted front quadrangle cast yellow spheres of light. He put on a gown and went downstairs. The warden’s door was locked. He remembered that he was out of town. He had a sudden urge to go back and ask Ayush to come along, but then, he thought better of it. He paused at the foot of the staircase and listened. No sound. He let out a cough. Still nothing. Assuming that the guards were asleep, he went out to the quadrangle and at once, cold air hit his face, and what he saw before him made him take a step back.

A dense mist hung in the quadrangle. It had not taken more than five minutes to come down from his dormitory. The fact that the mist had come down so quickly startled him. Tiny droplets of water began to form on his eye-lashes. He wiped them and stepped outside. The stars had vanished completely and the mist had acquired a yellow tinge from the lamp-posts. Burying his hands deep into his pockets, he ran down a small

flight of steps at one side of the quadrangle. The steps led to one end of a shaded path that ran all the way down to the Junior School. Small, yellow spheres hung above him, going down with the path and becoming fainter till they mingled into one.

The mist now seemed welcoming to Rohan. He could easily have made his way to the Auditorium without being spotted. On the other hand, he would have to be extremely careful as his visibility was limited to only a few feet. Bending low and keeping to a side, he slowly made his way down the path, squinting into the mist for any sign of movement. It seemed to go on for ages. He kept looking back, only to see the ghastly mist swallow the path. Eventually, he saw the yellow spheres turn left to the Junior School dormitory and straight ahead was a white light emanating from the Infirmary. He left the shaded path. The mist began to lighten. Further down, a lamp-post was hovering at the edge of a vast void of darkness. The massive figure of the Auditorium began to loom on his left, its flood-light washing the entire courtyard of the Junior School in an arid shade of yellow.

He quickly scanned the area. Nothing moved, and he broke into a run. He turned left on the porch and headed for the balcony overlooking the Field, which was now merely a gaping darkness. Wiping water droplets off his hair, he made his way through scattered tables and benches, while the mist swirled in the nasty darkness that brooded in this part of the school. He was getting nervous. Every now and then a strange figure would appear out of the mist, and every now and then he heard a sound that reminded he was not alone. It was only when he reached the door that he realised that he had forgotten to keep it open from inside earlier that day. He stood stoned in front of the door for a few moments. First came pity.

Really! All this for nothing!

Then came anger, and without intending, he punched the door. It sounded like an explosion in the night. Alarmed, he turned to leave; but then, there was a distinct thud as a heavy iron bolt fell from its hold.

The door creaked open.

Beaming at his luck, Rohan stepped inside and at once was bathed in eerie darkness. He closed the door behind him and after fumbling along a wall, switched on the lights. The brightness startled him for a moment and then came the green chairs. Rows and rows of empty chairs ran away from him, disappearing into the darkness on the other side of the hall. And once invisible, they whispered, for he almost heard them. Right in front of him was a board with the names of martyrs of the World Wars. The portraits of long gone principals sneered at him. He looked away from them and tried to focus on his plan. Coming down to the Auditorium was the trickiest part. But that was done. He might have made a bit of noise breaking in, but he did not expect it would have alerted the guards. He was sure Nisha must have put the chair back in the room to make her point. All he had to do now was retrieve the pullover from the Green Room. He made for the stage, and his eyes fell on the ancient piano half hidden in darkness. And all of a sudden, he felt fear. There was something lingering there, something he couldn't see, or hear, but he felt it. Some sort of heaviness hung there; a shadow that no light could kill. It was as if the piano was calling him. He wanted to get away. But all he did was stand there at look at it.

What are you doing!

He shook his head, almost surprised that he had been staring at the piano. He climbed on the stage and after a bit of struggle, found the opening in the thick green curtains. He flung them apart and stepped through. No sooner had he taken a step ahead than the curtains fell back and he was swallowed in a faint greenish light. Carefully, he made his way to the right side of the stage where a wooden staircase went down to the Green Room. It was more than ancient and groaned with every step he took. A red light came from below. Soon, he was in the corridor beneath the stage. On the other end he could see another staircase going up. A red bulb glowed in the centre. As he walked towards the waiting room, he heard distant voices. He felt his face go warm. He held his breath

and listened. It appeared as if two guards were in the middle of a hilarious joke. Still thinking how he could hear them two storeys above in a packed room, he switched on a light and that very instant, the voices died.

What... the... hell!

It was an open window. He could see nothing but swirling mist beyond, but the guards must have noticed the light. Rohan knew that the moment they saw the light, they would be on their heels... running away from the Auditorium. The chances of the dead coming out of a grave were far too high than that of a student coming out of his bed. But they might return with others. He looked around the room. It had nothing except the old props and costumes. He went to the make-up room. As expected, the chair was in front of the mirror. But there was no pullover. He searched the toilets and returned to the make-up room. For inexplicable reasons, he paused to examine the chair; and the story came floating in his mind... *the chair is always found in front of the mirror no matter where you leave it...*

“Really?” Rohan asked the chair, his voice louder than he had intended. “Always in front of the mirror?” This was what he had set out to prove. It was just a stupid story. He imagined a girl sitting on it. He found it hilarious to some extent. A girl sitting all alone in the dark... The pullover came back to his mind, and he moved away, kicking the chair as he did. It toppled over to a side. “Sorry, ma’am!”

He went to the last room and switched on a light. The floor was carpeted and scattered with old, dirty costumes; and in a far corner, he noticed a navy-blue pullover. ‘110’ was scribbled on its tag. It was hers. He had found it. All he had to do now was run back to the dormitory and sleep for what was left of the night. He felt sudden excitement. He was exultant. He was restless. He wanted to go back and let everyone know what he had just done and above all, let Chandni know. He couldn’t wait for the audition; wait to see the look on her face when she found out!

He picked up the pullover beaming with pride and turned

to leave. And then, something pulled at his leg. He fell forward with a crash, his heart in his mouth. He looked up just in time to see one of his slippers hit a wall and drop. Frantic, he rose to his knees and looked around. Apparently, his left foot had been caught in loose strands of the carpet and his fall had turned it over almost half way across the room. He stood up, coughed once, sneezed twice, retrieved his slipper and kicked the carpet back to place.

It was then he saw it.

It was an earring. It lay hidden in dust, till the carpet blew away most of it as it fell back to place. Rohan picked it up. It was star shaped, intricately designed, studded with white stones. He rubbed it against his gown and the stones sparkled. He turned it around. It was probably made of silver. The pin was broken. He tossed it between his hands, then put it in his pocket and headed back for the stairs, his mind working out the best strategy to get back to his bed.

He didn't notice the chair. It stood in the centre of the make-up room, facing the mirror.

Rohan ran upstairs. He had done it. The darkness of the stage didn't bother him. He searched for the opening in the curtains and jumped down the stage. He made for the exit but the piano caught his attention again. There was something strange about it. Sadness emanated from its wood. He thought he heard it play a sad tune... coming from far away, as if from a different time. Suppressing a strong urge to linger a little more, he switched off the lights and shut the door gently behind him.

He waited for his eyes to adjust in the darkness, and then...

What was that?

...a piano key had struck!

Rohan jumped around. He felt as if he had fallen through a frozen lake. He stared blankly at the door. Then came the tingling warmth, all the way up his spine to his face. Did he imagine it? No! It had been so real! His face was burning, his heart ready to explode. Yet, he now felt as if it had never

happened. He let out a sigh. Yes, he had imagined it and it had scared him to death; or maybe, some silly little rodent scurrying across the strings.

He put on the pullover under his gown and went to the porch. The mist had lightened. The Junior School quadrant was deserted. He ran to the Infirmary and knocked at the door. A light flickered on inside. He grabbed his stomach and stooped the moment the door opened. A short man appeared at the door, rubbing his grey hair. "What?" he asked, clearly irritated.

"Stomach-ache!" Rohan winced in pain.

"Where is the warden's slip?"

"He is out of town."

The attendant stared at him for a moment, deciding. Every student had to produce a slip from the warden for night visits to the Infirmary and Sister was strict about it. However, she was asleep and the attendant concluded it was better to quickly hand over a medicine and resume his sleep than make a fuss over the slip. Rohan thanked him and pretended to swallow the medicine.

He had done it. He was no longer a mischievous student, a *criminal* if one was comfortable switching to the warden's perspective, who had almost scared two guards to death. He was a sick boy now, so miserable with pain that he had to come all the way down to the Infirmary on such a cold night as this. Nevertheless, he kept a watch on the shaded path for some time. Why to have any argument with the guards when it could be avoided?

The yellow spheres went up and up and died in the mist. With his eyes and ears open, he carefully walked back to the front quadrangle. He heard voices in the guard-room. They were awake. There was no point hiding. Even if he was seen, he had an excuse. The door was shut. He leapt up the steps on his toes. The lights inside the warden's house were on. He was back. With a surge of desperation and panic, Rohan darted across the wooden corridor and within seconds he was climbing another set of stairs to his dormitory.

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The two guards had run all the way up to the Senior School and had informed others about the light. It took almost half an hour for the bravest among them to lead them down to investigate. The Auditorium came into view. They huddled under a lamp-post in terror and gaped at each other.

The Auditorium was dark and dark were its windows. And in that darkness was someone sitting at the piano?

They turned around and fled. One of them fell. "Wait!" he cried. But none looked back.

A sad melody was drifting across the Field towards them.

END OF SAMPLE