

WHO KILLED THE MURDERER?

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PART 1

THE BEGINNINGS
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We are each our own devil, and we make this world our hell.

Oscar Wilde

CHAPTER 1

SHAGUN MEHRA was an eleven-year-old schoolgirl with a happy family and a promising career in dance. However, that cursed October night was waiting to kill her dreams and rip her world apart.

Like each Friday, that evening, too, a few students of the Holy High School had gathered in the assembly hall after school hours for the optional Kathak dance class. Dressed in immaculate white salwar-kurtas teamed with bright red dupattas tied around their waists, the enthusiastic kids looked like professional dancers. They moved gracefully around the hall, their feet adorning anklets made of tiny metal bells skillfully roped together. The jingling of these ghungroos produced beautiful rhythmic reverberations that enabled the girls to dance in sync with the music, making the recital delightful.

Little Shagun couldn't sit still even after the dance class was over. With the ghungroos still tied to her feet, she danced to the corridor adjacent to the assembly hall. She gulped down all the water in her bottle before finally settling down to untie her ghungroos. She had barely undone the one on her left ankle when her classmate Lalit called her.

Surprised to see him still in school, Shagun asked, 'What are you doing here? Your sister doesn't take Kathak lessons!'

Skirting her question, Lalit said in an excited tone, 'You won't believe what has happened! Akash is waiting for you in the store room.'

Rishabh, another classmate, came running towards Shagun. 'Akash is calling you,' he added, panting.

Shagun's eyes lit up instantly. With the untied ghungroos in one hand, and the other one still wrapped around her right ankle, she sprang up from the ground.

'Wow! Really?' Shagun was overjoyed that her twin brother, Akash, had managed to enter that secret room in school—the room that had a haunted aura about it; the one that was out of bounds for students.

'Yes, and it looks very mysterious. Hurry up, if you want to have a look. Else Ramu Chacha will come and shoo us away,' scowled Lalit.

Ramu Chacha was the eternally grumpy-faced housekeeper of Holy High School and his favourite activity was yelling at the children. Nobody wanted to be in his radar.

Shagun shrieked, 'No, no; let's go quickly!'

'Take off those ghungroos. We need to tiptoe in there,' instructed Lalit.

'Oh, yes,' Shagun replied and quickly complied. Pressing the anklets close to her heart, she said, 'Let's go!'

The three children ran to the store room—the designated 'secret room' of the school. The door was ajar.

'How did you get the keys?' Shagun asked.

'Shhh... quiet!' whispered Lalit. 'Go inside or let's go back. Don't shout. You will ruin everything!'

'Oh... sorry!' Shagun said softly before pushing the door with her tiny hands. Eyes wide open, she peeped inside, clasping the door handle. Weirdly, the room didn't appear as spooky as she had imagined it to be.

'There is nothing in here,' Shagun said softly. 'I am going!'

'Wait,' Lalit demanded. 'Just imagine how this room will look after sunset. Perhaps evil spirits live here!'

Shagun raised her eyebrows with an awed expression. The lights were switched off. She glanced at the switchboard. She wanted to switch on the lights and take a closer look around. However, distracted by the creepy smell inside the room, Shagun promptly covered her nose with her hands.

‘Where is my brother?’ she asked her classmates. ‘I don’t see him inside.’

‘He is sitting in the corner, waiting for you,’ Rishabh said, under his breath.

Shagun mustered up courage and put her right leg inside the room. All she could see were piles of files in open racks and lines of locked cupboards, which looked like they hadn’t been used in years.

‘Akash Bhaiya,’ she whispered. When no one responded, she raised her voice. ‘Aaakaash?’

Suddenly, Shagun felt someone push her. She fell on her face to the ground. The door slammed behind her.

Shagun managed to get up on her feet and looked around. There was nobody in that room.

She banged the door. ‘Rishabh, Lalit! Open the door!’

All she could hear were giggles outside the room, followed by a noise of someone locking the room.

‘No! Please, help. Don’t go!’ Shagun pleaded.

‘Will you lie to the principal about us again? Now cry all night. Serves you right!’

‘No, no. I am sorry,’ Shagun cried.

She remembered complaining to the school principal about her brother and his friends. The previous week, Shagun had accidentally damaged the principal’s favourite flower pot in the school garden. It was a huge pot of fragrant roses and the principal was extremely attached to his prized possession.

Instead of admitting her mistake, Shagun falsely accused her brother and his friends Lalit and Rishabh of spoiling the flower pot.

The principal punished the three boys. They had to kneel down in the assembly hall, holding one another's ears during school assembly each morning, for a whole week. The entire school could see them up on the stage with their heads lowered. Classmates would laugh at them and senior students even gave them a nickname—three little pigs.

The reaction of the students didn't bother Akash much. However, Lalit and Rishabh felt insulted and embarrassed. They were furious with Shagun and decided to teach her a lesson. They knew Shagun was curious about exploring the store room. Once they managed to steal the keys, luring her into the room was easy.

'Now, you sit and cry!' Lalit laughed.

'If we are pigs, you are the devil,' Rishabh added.

'Please open the door. I said I am sorry. Please,' Shagun cried helplessly.

There was no answer. Shagun banged on the door again. She heard footsteps. Soon, the sound grew faint. Finally, she couldn't hear them anymore.

Shagun shouted for help. Nobody responded. She realised that nobody would come to help her. Students were not allowed near the store room. Teachers never treaded down that path. Only Ramu Chacha had access to that room. She shuddered at the thought of seeing him open the door at night.

Shagun walked up to the switchboard. None of the lights were functional. She managed to switch on the fan. Luckily, it was working. Once the fan started moving, the room became dirtier. Shagun never imagined fan blades to be so dirty! But it didn't matter after a while.

Soon, it grew dark. Scared, Shagun screamed as hard as she could. But nobody came to help. She noticed a huge spider web in front of her. Terrified, she closed her eyes and hid her face in her hands. Shagun remembered her mother and began to cry again.

They all must be looking for me. How could Akash do this to me?

A few hours later, Shagun felt sleepy. She guessed it would be almost 9 p.m. She was hungry and thirsty.

After a while, Shagun fell asleep, hugging herself.

But, within a few minutes, she woke up with a start as she felt a bite on her toe. She looked around but didn't see anything.

As her eyes got accustomed to the darkness, Shagun realised that she had company in the room—a big, fat rat. Petrified, she screamed and stood up on the chair. She hugged herself tightly and started praying to God.

Shagun heard weird shrill sounds in the room. It took her a few seconds to figure out that there were many rats in the room. All this while, they had been hiding inside the dirty shelves and files.

Shagun froze as she felt a flying rat land on her neck and bite her ear. She threw out her hands in reflex and the ghungroos that she was still holding on to fell on the ground, along with the rat. Shivering, Shagun sat down on the chair with her hands and feet curled up. Tears kept rolling down her cheeks. A rat jumped on her lap and she fell out of the chair on the floor. Her hands touched the ghungroos. Instantly, Shagun picked them up and jumped back on the chair. Then, she tied the ghungroos around her ankles and put her feet on the ground. Without wasting a minute, Shagun started dancing. She threw her hands and feet in the air vigorously to keep the rats away.

After dancing in fear for almost an hour, the girl was tired. She couldn't see or feel the rats around her anymore. She sat down on the chair with her legs folded up. She opened one set of ghungroos and tied it around her hand. She was thirsty and couldn't keep her eyes open anymore.

Shagun couldn't remember how long she had stayed like that but she woke up with the feeling of something nibbling at her ear. She hit her ear with the ghungroo-tied hand with such force that it started bleeding. Shagun could barely feel the pain. She noticed the shiny eyes of a rat on the floor, just in front of her chair. She stabbed it with a sharp open edge of the ghungroo. The little animal quivered in pain for a while and then lay still on the ground.

Now, it was Shagun's turn to look for more rats. Even in that pitch darkness, she spotted one more and beat it hard with the ghungroo. It couldn't escape and fell prey to her attack.

Shagun repeated this act several times until she had no strength left in her hands or legs. Strangely, she started feeling good! As she killed the rats, she now wanted to kill more of them. She waited, quietly.

The rats were not visible anymore. The smell of the dead rats made her feel nauseated.

The sunlight that trickled in through the gaps in the tightly shut window comforted her somewhat. She noticed that her white salwar-kurta was stained red, her feet were bleeding, and her hands had deep scratch marks.

Shagun made a promise to herself. Once she was out of this dungeon-like room, she would punish her culprits. She was not afraid anymore.

She dozed off on the dirty floor, right next to the dead rats.

CHAPTER 2

Shagun's hands and legs were wrapped up in bandage. She had scratch marks all over her face, and her lips were white.

'102 degrees'—the nurse wrote down in the temperature chart before handing over the patient card to the doctor.

'Oh, my God! What has happened to my child?' cried Indira Mehra.

'She is in trauma,' the doctor replied in a serious tone. 'There are rodent bites on her hands, ears, and legs. It is a miracle that she survived.'

'What?' Indira Mehra gripped the corner of the hospital bed and sat down.

'Yes, there was a lot of blood loss. She is stable now. But she will take time to come out of the trauma. Your daughter is a brave girl, Mrs Mehra.'

'How on earth did she get into that room? Did someone lock her up there?' Mrs Mehra screamed.

Family and friends who had gathered at the hospital tried to console Indira Mehra.

Her husband, Ravi Mehra, stood outside his daughter's room, tongue-tied. Clinging on to him on either side were Akash, Shagun's twin brother, and six-year-old Pooja, the Mehra's youngest child.

'The police are here, Mr Mehra,' the doctor informed.

'I want to take my daughter home,' Mrs Mehra shot back.

'We cannot release her before another day at least. She might catch an infection if discharged from the hospital now,' replied the doctor.

‘I will sue the school for being so irresponsible! You know how crazily we searched the entire city looking for our daughter last evening!’ Indira Mehra was inconsolable.

Ravi Mehra had a brief conversation with the police inspector.

Two days later, Shagun was discharged from the hospital. When she got home, Akash asked her, ‘What were you doing in the store room, Shagun? How did you get in there?’ He was anxious and restless.

‘Don’t you know, Akash? Just wait till I get back on my feet,’ Shagun replied, gritting her teeth.

‘What do you mean?’ Akash asked, surprised.

‘Don’t try to fool me. You cannot get away with it!’

‘What are you talking about, Shagun?’

‘You locked me in that room! You are a devil, Akash!’

‘What nonsense! Who told you that?’

‘Nobody has to tell me; I know everything! Just you wait,’ she snarled feebly, unable to move her jaws without biting her tongue. It was painful. She felt like smashing Akash’s head but didn’t have the strength to even talk in complete sentences.

‘What happened?’ Indira Mehra came running to Shagun’s room.

‘Akash, stop teasing your sister. She is not keeping well. Just leave her alone.’

Akash walked away, confused.

Days passed by.

Shagun didn’t utter a word about the incident to her parents, despite repeated requests. Akash wondered why she was

blaming him. The child psychiatrist, too, couldn't get Shagun to talk about what had transpired.

At school, Lalit and Rishabh started avoiding Akash, afraid that he was aware of their misdeed. They were scared that once Shagun returned to school, the brother-sister duo would report everything to the principal.

'Do you think Akash found out that we lied to Shagun?' asked Rishabh.

'Shhh... just keep your mouth shut,' Lalit replied.

Rishabh whispered, 'Okay... but had she told him, he would have come to us by now.'

Lalit glanced at Rishabh with an evil smirk. 'You are right!'

Each evening, after returning from school, Akash tried to talk to Shagun. But she continued ignoring him.

Whenever Shagun saw Akash, she remembered that dreadful night. She was annoyed that Akash didn't seem to have an iota of guilt for what he had done. He never apologised to her.

Over the next few weeks, Shagun's health started improving and soon she started walking. However, she refused to go to school. She was physically fit now but the mental trauma was tearing her apart. Indira Mehra was by her daughter's side all the time. She never left Shagun alone. When the police visited Shagun, she said nothing.

'We don't want to file any complaint,' Mrs Mehra told the police.

'But, Madam, we need to know what happened. What if someone tries to harm her again?' asked the police officer.

'The principal has guaranteed us my daughter's safety,' Indira replied.

'Maybe you would like to consult a psychiatrist. I know someone who works well with children,' suggested the officer.

Ravi Mehra nodded, but as he began to speak, Indira interrupted. 'No, Officer,' she said promptly. 'We don't want any psychiatrist. We already saw how efficient the previous one was,' she added, sarcastically. 'She scared my child!'

'That is an incorrect allegation, Ma'am. The doctor didn't get any time alone with your daughter!'

'Not required,' Indira Mehra flared up. 'My daughter is not mad!'

'Mrs Mehra,' the officer continued, 'You are getting me wrong. In these kinds of cases, consulting an expert always helps. They will help your child get back to a normal life.'

'That's enough, Officer! I know what is best for my daughter. We don't need any help.'

And then, the inevitable happened.