

# SCARE ME IF YOU CAN

SID KAPDI



TreeShade Books

# PROLOGUE

It was a cold and breezy full-moon evening on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2019. The atmosphere at the Filmstar awards ceremony in BKC in Mumbai was electrifying. Jio Stadium provided a rare opportunity for star-gazing – in the sky as well on the ground. The who's who of Bollywood, television stars, cricketers, politicians, industrialists, and other Page-3 regulars were in attendance.

“Good Evening, ladies and gentlemen. The award for Best Screenwriting goes to... well, no surprises here... Sivan Singh and team for Scare Me If You Can!” the gorgeous heart-throb Apsara Khanna announced from the podium. Sivan kissed his wife and sprang to his feet, as a powerful beam of light from a drone above followed him. Sivan watched his nine other co-writers jump in triumph, hugging each other on the way, as they marched in unison behind him, on to the stage.

“Thank you, God, for being so kind to us,” Sivan beamed in his speech. It was not his tall, muscular frame with a tight-fitting suit and neatly maintained beard but his genuine smile and humility that made him stand out. “It has been an unbelievable journey; it is a conquest of teamwork. On behalf of our team, I would like to thank all those who kept

faith in us including our families and friends, the producers and director for bringing our writing to life on such a phenomenal scale, and all the actors who enacted the characters passionately. Thanks to the readers and our agent Sunil Mehta for making our book a blockbuster, which prompted the production houses to approach us, and finally Filmstar for choosing us.”

“I also need to thank my good friend Jugal Wadhwani, the owner of Spooky End, the scariest resort in India. It was his invitation which started it all, about two years back. I accepted it and then met these gems – the *nav ratnas*, if you will. And the rest, as they say, is history.” The thunderous cheer was followed by tears, as the big screen flashed glimpses of the nine co-writers celebrating the book launch and completion of the script, followed by visuals of news coverage on their untimely death. Sivan wiped his tears and was about to leave when the host Kapil Kapoor stopped him.

“Sivan, we can imagine how painful it must be for you, how much do you miss your co-writers today?”

“I don’t miss them at all. They are here, right next to me. All dressed in their finest and rejoicing. In fact, they are the reason I am here, on this stage today. All our souls are connected, I still see them and can talk to them,” Sivan mumbled, getting a bit emotional.

“Wow, Sivan. Just one last question. We understand that you wrote the tenth story in the anthology, which the audience found extremely fearsome and disturbing. Tell us something about Ajgar, the deadliest character in the movie. How did you come up with such an idea?”

This was the exact topic that Sivan did not want to discuss, and he dished out his well-rehearsed reply. “When I wrote that story, there was a local folk tale about Ajgar and his misdeeds. Taking a cue from there, I made up some events about his past and added a bit of horror *masala* to it, making it the spiciest item on the menu. And full marks to Roshan Puri who brought Ajgar to life, the way no one could have,” Sivan stuttered and left the stage, his hands shivering and sweat beads growing on his face and neck.

“Hey Sivu, what’s the matter? Are you ok?” his wife Shruti enquired, as Sivan slumped into his chair.

“Yes dear, nothing to worry. Let me wash my face and be back in five,” Sivan whispered and rushed towards the rear door. Shruti had begun worrying ever since his talks with the dead co-writers had become more frequent and many-a-times he appeared lost. She knew how involved Sivan had become with the *nav ratnas*, whose lives had ended horrifically, right in front of them. Unfortunately, Sivan considered himself responsible for their deaths and had never come to terms with life without them.

The mention of Ajgar’s name on stage had disturbed Sivan immensely. He had started to see the face of the real Ajgar – the man he feared the most - in whomsoever he was coming across. Be it the singer who entered as he exited the door, or the assistant director of a suspense movie in the passage, or even the director of Scare Me If You Can, who hugged him as he passed by. Sivan pushed the restroom door with so much force that it almost hit the nose of an actor on the other side. Apologizing, he slowly moved towards the urinals. A short *sardarji* with

a long white beard, dressed in a loose blue-coloured *kurta-pyjama* walked in front of him and moved towards the third urinal. Sivan took the second one. The *sardarji* stood more than a foot behind the fixture and was relieving himself as if trying to avoid getting closer. Once done, he suddenly came forward, turned his head towards Sivan, and flashed a smile which Sivan returned. When their eyes locked momentarily, Sivan saw glimpses of Ajgar in his face and immediately looked the other way. After quickly washing his face and hands, Sivan began to sprint back towards his seat via the dimly-lit hallway, avoiding eye contact with anyone. As he joined a few others entering the door that led to his seating area, he felt someone's hand in his coat pocket. He swung around, but could only see a shadowy figure rushing in the direction opposite to the washroom. He instinctively felt his pocket and confirmed that his mobile was still in its place.

Settling down on his chair, Sivan drowned himself in his thoughts and stayed that way for almost an hour. He forced a smile and exchanged a high-five with his wife Shruti and a couple of others when he heard superstar Mickey Khan announce, "... and the best movie of the year is - the five-hour-long Hinglish movie - Scare Me If You Can!" The audience sprang back on its feet, and there were shouts, cheers, whistles, and hugs. They felt as if it was their victory. The movie had universal appeal and the unique concept had triggered 'Scare Me If You Can' contests all over – colleges, offices, public places, picnics, and even in homes. It was a hit, both on and off the screen. No one had imagined that it would become so popular.

Sivan's mind flashed back over two years in time when it had all started.

# THE WORKSHOP

## SPOOKY END CALLING

It was a lazy Sunday morning, in early December of the year 2016. Sivan Singh was on cloud nine, reeling over his success. Seated leisurely at his dining table with a cup of hot Mysore coffee, he was scanning through a newspaper when he came across an article that made him smile.

*‘The Last Drop of Evil Blood’ is at the top of India’s most-read and critically acclaimed books of 2016. Written by the master storyteller Sivan Singh, it traces the journey of a four-year-old possessed boy who defeats the spirit within after nearly getting killed. This and Sivan’s previous two books of 2015, managed to shake not only the readers due to the horror factor but the fiction genre in general. Where romantic and general masala stories have dominated the Indian market, the horror genre is steadily getting the importance it deserves - thanks to rockstar writers like Sivan and some others.*

*With a B.Tech degree in Automobile Engineering and an MBA in Marketing, Sivan Singh has worked for eight years with leading*

*Indian and German carmakers followed by a decade with the top ERP software companies globally. Early this summer he resigned from his position as VP (Sales) at one of the largest global IT companies and decided to become an independent consultant, to dedicate more time for his passion. He is among the most followed bloggers in India and writes about cars, crime, and paranormal activities. He is forty-two (yes, he looks no more than thirty-five!) and lives with his wife Shruti and their nine-year-old daughter Shivani in Vashi, Navi Mumbai.*

Sivan's ride towards success in fiction writing was not easy. He had to self-publish his debut book and spend a lot of time and energy to make it reach the right audience. Of course, after it became a best-seller, there was no looking back. Aspiring to be India's Stephen King, he hoped that someday his books would upstage King's in readership and the headlines would read 'Singh is the new King'. He also wanted to move to screen-writing and movie direction.

A buzz near his plate brought him back from the past and future into the present. He saw the name of his childhood buddy Jugal, flashing on his iPhone screen. After the initial greetings, Jugal came straight to the point. "*We are planning to organise a workshop on Advanced Horror Writing, between 10th and 14th of December at Spooky End. Can you anchor it?*" Sivan agreed, considering his family would be away on vacation during that period and he needed a break. The crazy hours he had been spending on his paranormal crime thriller novel were sapping him of his energy. Besides, Spooky End Resort, a five-star property in the heart of Mahabaleshwar, was one of its kind in India – a horror-themed resort highly popular for

its thrills. He believed that conducting a workshop in such an environment would be a unique experience in itself.

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Sivan had left very early on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December for Mahabaleshwar by road in his red-coloured customised SUV, that never failed to turn heads as it fashioned its way along the highway, seducing the on-lookers with its style and grace. Upon touching Medha Road, the GPS showed that the destination was hardly a couple of kilometres away, and the road which had been straight as a sword became a sickle, curving to the left. Out of nowhere, a gigantic skull suddenly came into sight. He was mesmerised – the resort structure was designed in the form of a towering grey skull and a ramp in the form of a bright red tongue protruded out of the jaws and extended till the entrance gate. Sivan was reminded of Castle Grayskull from a favourite childhood TV programme, *Heman and the Masters of the Universe*. Charging up the tongue-like ramp, the SUV entered the resort.

After leaving the vehicle with the scary-looking valet-parking attendant who seemed to be a *rakshasa* (demon), straight out of Ramayana, Sivan inched towards the huge glass door which opened on its own with a creaky sound. As he dragged his blue suitcase to the reception, he noticed that lighting was minimal, and the staff walked by like zombies - with creepy outfits and masks. It was very cold inside and he got an unnerving, discomfiting feeling. The facilities were named appropriately as well - *Blood Zone*, *Bone Garden*, *Ghost Room*, and *Vampire corner*. He figured that the resort had six floors with about twenty rooms on each.



The receptionist, who was dressed as a devil presented Sivan with a small cover, which resembled a flattened frog. It had a smart card with 'Third Victim, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor' written on it. Sivan opened the casket-shaped door of his room and quickly freshened up. Manoj, the event co-ordinator came to meet him for a quick chat over coffee to confirm the plan for the four days. The smartly dressed young man had already made the arrangements as per Sivan's instructions. In total, ten participants had enrolled, but due to a last-minute cancellation, there were going to be just nine. Many of them had arrived the previous day itself and had already got a taste of what Spooky End had in store.

## THE PARTICIPANTS

*Deadly Dungeon*, a conference room, was at the far-end corner on the first floor. It overlooked the *Bloody Swimming Pool* (its red tiles and red roof made the water look like blood) on one side and *Devil's Cottages* on the other. Manoj and Sivan were about to enter when they overheard an interesting conversation. A female voice in the room asked, "Some say this place is haunted, has anyone of you heard it too?" – to which a male voice replied, "Yes, a friend from my neighbourhood has been here before, he had experienced weird things at night. That's the main reason I am here." Another male voice remarked, "Welcome to Spooky End, guys. I am still shivering from my experience in the park last night. Just lucky to be still alive!"

The duo walked into the room and Manoj announced, "Ladies and Gentleman, it is my pleasure to introduce the

one and only Sivan Singh - the horror superstar with three bestsellers in his name and our boss for the next four days.” Sivan took a couple of minutes to survey the room and was impressed. Housing black furniture, the décor had been created to look scary—an odd-shaped large table that rested on wooden supports that reminded one of the human limbs and a dozen seats with a skeleton-like back. A side table next to the wall on the right held the refreshments such as tea, coffee, beverages, and biscuits. The projector, whiteboard with marker pens, network connection ports, and good quality speakers were the actual items that made it look like a conference room.

“Good Morning friends, am thrilled to be here,” Sivan remarked as he greeted the participants and positioned himself on the chair in front of the whiteboard. The nine participants – six men and three women – seemed glued to every action of his.

“Manoj, thank you for collecting the sample work of the authors and sharing them with me. Yesterday while going through them, I was impressed with the quality of writing and the ideas that you guys have put into your works. All of us would benefit if we know a little bit more about yourself and your expectations from this workshop. Maybe we can start with the lovely lady to my left and then go around,” Sivan suggested and started taking notes on his iPad.

The petite, fair lady in a designer dress spoke up in a slight Maharashtrian accent, “Hi everyone, I am Kavita Achrekar from Pune. I am twenty-eight, and mother of a two-year-old. I am primarily a fashion designer and have published four

novellas on KDP. Romance and comedy are my forte. My main objective is to learn how to blend horror into a romantic story.”

The lean man with a thick beard seated after Kavita flashed a wide smile. “Friends, I am Rohan Krishnan, popularly called Rocky. I am thirty-eight and I work for an IT company in Bangalore. I have published a couple of suspense novels and a book on short stories for kids. I am mainly looking to understand how to scare my readers with the right horror elements,” he said.

The third participant was a tall and dark hunk whose tight T-shirt seemed unable to contain his bulging biceps. “Hi all, I am Ashok Kale from Mumbai. I am thirty-one and run a tour company. I am an avid traveller and a semi-professional photographer. I have written a couple of books on wildlife tours including the widely popular ‘*Jungle Mein Mangal with AK*’ last year. I would like to learn how to make my stories more visual,” he announced.

The next participant was a gentleman with a thick mop of hair and thin-rimmed glasses that give his face an intelligent look. “This is Rajneesh Rastogi. I am thirty-six, a scientist in astrobiology and associated with a German company based out of Kanpur that researches extra-terrestrial life. I published my first novel last year called *A Honeymoon on Mars*. I want to hone my skills for completing a couple of horror stories I have started on. After hearing the title of Ashok’s successful book, I may call one of them as ‘*Mangal Mein Jungle*’. How’s that sound?” Sivan laughed and others too joined in.

The fifth participant was a tall, classy girl, who looked like an athlete. “Hello, my name is Falguni Shah, I am twenty-seven and work in the HR department of an IT firm in Ahmedabad. I am an adventure sports enthusiast; I love travelling and cooking. I have written a non-fiction book on work and personal life balance, as well as a couple of thrillers. I would like to sharpen my skills at articulating horror situations better and to learn about fear factors in various types of people,” she said.

The young man, medium-build wearing a funky shirt depicting an adorable dog with sunglasses raised his hand. “Hello fellow-authors, I am Arbaaz Ahmed. I am thirty and live in Hyderabad. I have published a non-fiction novel on the state of slaughterhouses in India and a children’s storybook on animals. I am associated with PETA and a couple of animal shelters. I would like to learn how to write better horror scenes involving animals and how to write dragon and monster tales.”

The seventh participant was a short and chubby man with long, curly hair. He appeared funny and naughty. “Friends, the hunk you are staring at, and listening to with rapt attention is called John Miranda. I am thirty-five and work as a chef at Hotel Eleganzia in Goa. I have authored a book on cake baking and I plan to write my next on a horror theme in the kitchen for which I am looking for inspiration,” he said.

The next participant of medium height and lean built with carefully partitioned oily hair looked elegant in an expensive-looking *kurta*. With a thumbs-up, he began, “My name is Vasudev Ghosh, Vasu for short. I am thirty-two and a lecturer at a college in Kolkata. My debut book was a collection of

romantic stories and am currently writing a full-length novel on a sensational murder during the elections in Bengal. I am interested to know, how to creatively present gore without making readers puke.”

The last participant was a tall, pretty lady in a purple dotted dress whom Sivan had instantly liked. He realised later that unknowingly, he had been staring at her frequently. “Friends, I am Dr. Shobha Pillai and I am from Cochin. I am thirty-one and work with a popular hospital chain. I have authored a horror novel earlier, which no one, including my husband, could dare to read completely. I would like to learn about how to balance the gore and non-gore elements in a horror story,” she revealed.

“Well, that brings us to the end of the introductions. Thank you so much, for sharing about yourselves and your work! I can see that I am in very interesting company, many of you have more writing experience than I do. I am sure this will be a learning journey for me as well. Now, let us look at the agenda for the four days, which Manoj has helped me design. I would make use of visual and audio aids for our sessions, and will try to keep them as interactive as possible,” Sivan continued, displaying a slide.

The workshop agenda indicated three days of intense discussions, video shows, assignments in the classroom, and personal coaching. The fourth day’s schedule covered a read-out session where each author was to read out the short story written by him or her.

“Friends, I will now leave you with the master and will see you in the lunch break. We have *Ajitbhai* seated at the back,

who will help you with any kind of support you may need – be it related to a gadget or food or facility or whatever else,” Manoj declared, pointing towards the short gentleman seated on a stool in a corner. Ajit, who seemed to be in his late forties, joined his hands and gave out a reassuring smile.

## THE INSPIRATION

On day-1, Sivan started with the topics “What is fear and how is it caused?” and “How to build and raise suspense”. Post lunch, the Brad Pitt movie *Seven* was played, with pauses at various points engaging everyone in discussions around the building of fear and suspense. An engrossing group activity later, they decided to call it a day. The highlight of the day was the nano tale created by John, which went as: *A lady peeled a banana and when she tried to take a bite, a hand emerged from the banana, grabbed her by her face, and pulled her into the banana. The boyfriend watched in horror as the banana skin closed itself and the banana walked into his plate.*

It had been a tiring day for Sivan, and he went straight to the *Vishkanya's Den*, where his friend Jugal was waiting. They discussed their colourful past, dynamic present, and hopeful future, as the spooky music of *Dance Macabre* and *In the hall of the Mountain King* played on.

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On day-2, over breakfast, the participants were discussing their experiences at the resort.

Kavita seemed a bit disturbed. After hearing a couple of weird experiences, she said, “Know what? I was returning alone from the *Dard-hai-Jisko* disco pub at around midnight yesterday. The elevator doors closed with a creaky sound and the box lingered up at an ant’s pace. Out of nowhere, a pungent odour enveloped me as if some gas had been released inside. I felt nauseated and after an excruciating six minutes, I managed to reach the fourth floor. I was about to get into my nightgown, when the middle-aged farmer from the portrait painting on the wall, ogled at me. I pulled a comforter over myself and lied motionless. When I woke up today, guess what I found? There was no portrait at all. The frame held a damn mirror, instead!” Sivan and a couple of others sympathised with her.

Kavita’s roomie Falguni chipped in, “Oh my God! Our room must be haunted by the spirit of the middle-aged jerk. After you left the disco, Ashok and I continued for another hour. I boarded the elevator and was about to press the fourth-floor button when I heard a stern voice of a middle-aged man – ‘Fifth’. I was puzzled and turned behind, but there was no one. ‘I am the boss and you will do as I say! Go on the fifth and then go to your room slowly’ the voice howled. After getting off on the fifth floor, I tip-toed my way carefully towards the stairs and then quickly started my descent, taking two steps at a time. ‘How dare you disobey me? Who is the boss?’ Shaken by the voice again, I muttered, ‘You are.’ I was fully wet with my sweat when I entered our room. Kavita seemed fast asleep, covered from head to toe. I too got into my shell, similar to her.” Ashok and three others expressed their disgust.

Rocky, taking a bite of his chilli cheese toast said, “We had a few scary moments too. After dinner, my wife Roma and I were taking a walk when her mobile beeped and when she checked, it was our twelve-year son Rohan’s WhatsApp message. ‘I am scared, mom’ it said. Roma immediately tried calling him but could not connect. After a couple of message exchanges, she realized that Rohan who had been left at her parents’ house was afraid due to a cockroach in the room. Roma called her parents requesting them to take care of the issue. Our jaws dropped when we learnt that Rohan had already gone to sleep a couple of hours earlier and his mobile was in the custody of the senior couple! We kept getting messages from Rohan’s phone and in the middle of the night, we suddenly found large cockroaches all over our bed!”

The other participants continued sharing their odd experiences. Sivan himself while watching a horror movie on TV in his room, felt he saw his own room in one of the scenes, where the occupant was chopped to pieces that were stuffed into the A/C. The group concluded that they must be gimmicks done by the resort to stay true to its reputation.

Sivan took a prolonged session on ‘Show, Don’t Just Tell’ for describing fear and thrill and walked through several examples of how ‘tell’ could be made into ‘show’. A few exercises and group activities later, he showed a movie and grouped the participants into three, asking each group to come up with at least ten things that could have been done differently in the story. Finally, Sivan gave them a passage which had to be individually converted into a story of five hundred words focusing on the ‘Show’ aspect.



## *Scare Me If You Can*

In the evening, all had dinner together, including the spouses of some of the participants. Spooky End continued to give each one of them an unforgettable experience.

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On day-3, the buffet breakfast had a wider spread and everyone had their plates full.

“Hey dude, didn’t you see the tandoori chicken?” Vasu asked Arbaaz, upon seeing that the latter had taken only veggies and sandwich.

“No man, let me tell you why. Guys, I had an eye-opening experience yesterday night. I was taking a stroll after we dispersed and I noticed something coming out of my belly and falling on the ground. It was like a bird that settled in a semi-lit corner near the wall. It seemed to be a 3D-image of a virtual chick on the grass. ‘Happy after eating me in dinner?’ its sudden question and more importantly its ferocious voice stunned me. I continued to walk until I felt the bird flapping its wings inside me and it even pecked me multiple times inside my stomach. I was in real pain, I clutched my tummy and somehow trotted to my room on the first floor.”

Ashok sympathised, “Oh man, that must have hurt. I too became a target yesterday. I accompanied Falguni to her room to make sure she reached safely. When the elevator door opened on the fourth floor to take me down, I saw a sweating old man in shining white clothes, his back touching the rear wall. I smiled at him, but the man did not acknowledge. I pressed the G button and waited. The elevator shook vigorously and then came to a screeching halt between the second and third floors.

I tried to hit the alarm but the button itself fell inside the hollow board behind and the lights went off. I then started to bang on the door and when I put on the torch on my mobile, I found that the old man was gone!”

“That’s crazy. Hey, Rajneesh... what are you thinking? You seem lost,” Sivan asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing. My wife Simran wants us to go back home after the incident yesterday. We were relaxing on the chairs by the side of *Bloody Swimming Pool*. The water looked deadlier at night, almost like blood – mainly because of the bright red LED lights. While we were talking, there was a sudden splash of water, a figure emerged from the bottom and started to swim towards us. It was a woman in a swimsuit, her skin was reddish grey and we saw a kind of dagger inserted into her chest. We were terrified and as we began to run from the spot, she coolly said aloud to my wife, ‘See the words *No Cheating* written on that wall? I cheated on my husband and he killed me and wrote it with my blood last year. You too beware!’ and disappeared into the water.” Others were stunned upon hearing what had happened.

Back in the ‘classroom’, Sivan discussed the different levels of horror, ending with extreme gore and areas that Indian readers had not been accustomed to reading. He insisted that horror was a state of mind, and forcing ghosts and gore into the story would not mean that the horror level would be the highest. After lunch, Sivan walked them through good writing examples, showcasing passages from the works of Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Neil D’Silva, Ruskin Bond, and so on. This was

followed by group activities of converting the given passages that had comedy, romance, and adventures, into horror. Sivan was thoroughly impressed with the output of the participants.

“Folks, we are winding up early today so you get a chance to roam around and explore the scary props in this property, for your stories. You can’t imagine, how eager I am to hear them tomorrow,” Sivan said.

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On day-4, the group met up late in the morning, most of them seemed to have stayed awake to complete their stories for narration.

Vasu, who had been very active in the sessions, put up his hand at the breakfast table. He said, “Finally I too have something to scare. Oops...share. Yesterday, after a couple of drinks, I went for a walk outside the resort. I bought and smoked a cigarette at a nearby *tapri* (small shop). On the other side of the road, in a semi-dark patch under a tree, stood a lady in a colourful saree and gaudy make-up, waiting for someone. She made some interesting gestures at a man passing by on his bike and he immediately stopped and walked towards her. A few words were exchanged softly and then she suddenly burst out, ‘I fell in the manhole you had left open while working on Panchgani road 3 and I died. It’s time you too felt, what I went through.’ As if by some magic, the man, despite his resistance, got sucked into the gutter hole by the road side. Our eyes popped out at the sight and the lady disappeared in thin air! Only the bike stood there, unaware of what its master went through.”

“What the hell. That was scary,” Falguni responded and Ashok nodded in agreement.

John had been unusually silent, quietly sipping on his tea and taking an occasional bite of the *aloo paratha*. Finally, he decided to speak up. “Talking of a horrible scene, nothing matches what I saw yesterday. I had just ordered my fourth peg of scotch whisky at *Ghost Bar*, when my mobile buzzed, showing a WhatsApp video call from my ex. ‘Hey ex-baby, howdy?’ she asked. She looked hot as usual, her tight red spaghetti top and blood-red lips bringing back some wild memories in my spinning head. I greeted her and showed the scene of the bar around me. And when she showed hers, my mobile jumped off my slippery hands. Her wall had human hands and legs as pieces of art. I then heard her husband saying, ‘Honey, where do we hang this? The clown did not do his job properly and I brought his head along, as you had wanted.’ I can still see the eyes of the man whose head was severed, staring at me, as its butcher held it by the hair.”

Sivan said, “Can imagine your plight, but you can build this further into a fearful story. Shobha, you seem to be hesitant to speak, what is it? All ok?”

Shobha replied, “Yes, all good. I didn’t want to bring up my experience while we are having a meal, but will go on. Yesterday night, my husband Ranjith was busy watching one of his downloaded horror movies as usual. At around 12.15 AM, he was hungry and ordered Tiny Lady’s fingers. Ten minutes later, a zombie waiter arrived with the dish. The pieces were nicely shaped into eight fingers and two thumbs

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and placed in transparent tubes with diluted ketchup at the bottom. Engrossed in the movie and heavily intoxicated, he finished almost all the fingers, leaving the bones in the tubes. I felt tempted and tried to bite the last one and shrieked. It was an actual finger. A human finger! After both of us vomited and I was closing the curtain, I saw the zombie waiter again in the lobby arguing with a woman, who was in tears. Bandages indicated that her fingers and thumb on both hands had been recently chopped off. The waiter pulled the purse from her shoulder and placed a 100-rupee note inside it.”

“Oh my God! I don’t know what would happen to me if I see something like this,” Kavita confessed.

“Guys, hope you are almost ready for the grand finale – Scare Me If You Can. I will see you at lunch at 1 PM and then we move to the stage,” Sivan said and left.

The participants reflected on how the three days had raced past and how amazing Sivan, Manoj, and Ajit had been. They unanimously agreed that they were getting every penny’s worth of the thirty grand they had paid for the four days. All of them were going to carry back a lot of inspiration for future stories from the real-life events during their stay at Spooky End.

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After a sumptuous lunch, Manoj led them towards the lawn. Sivan could not hide his excitement upon watching the arrangements made for the last leg of his workshop. The stage was set – for a grand finale – in the middle of the lawns, beside the main building. Manoj and Ajit helped the nine participants take their seats on the granite steps surrounding

the stage. Sivan took to the podium and introduced his friend Sunil Mehta, a leading literary agent who had agreed to listen to the stories and give his feedback. The agent looked more like Agent 007, with his suit, shades, and body language in general.

“Friends, just to re-iterate, this event is called ‘Scare Me If You Can’. It is a challenge for the authors here to scare the audience with their stories. The audience will rate you based on how scary your story is. But remember, as we discussed in the last three days, there are many other elements of a story that are equally important, for which Sunil and I will provide personalised feedback later. Everyone is welcome to make general comments based on the story narrated. The stage is all yours now! And yes, since Sunil doesn’t know you, please start with your introduction and then read out your story. Good luck, horror authors, and scare me if you can!” Sivan concluded and took a balcony seat (last row, centre) next to Sunil. He updated Sunil regarding the weird experiences some of the participants got during the stay, and that the authors had based their stories on them.