Mystery Of
The Falling Mountains
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The Long Wait

"Why hasn't Dipak come?" It was the fifth time that Richa had repeated the question.

The boys did not answer. The children stood in a forlorn little group, surrounded by their bags, suitcases, holdalls, umbrellas and other holiday gear.

The crowd of passengers from the bus that had brought them to the hill station soon vanished. The air was now cold. Grey shadows crept closer as the sun dipped behind the lofty snow-covered peaks in the distance.

Richa shivered and pulled her jacket tighter around her. "Did he get our letter?" she wondered.

"As per my calculation it should have reached yesterday morning. That gives Dipak plenty of time to arrange for our transport," said Richa's brother Ajay. Ajay was an avid reader. He had acquired a vocabulary of long words that he loved to use. Tall and lanky, Ajay always managed to look slightly untidy, mainly because of his hair which he could never keep in place. And also because of his clothes, which always seemed a bit too short for him. For he grew too fast, his mother had explained.

Rustom, Ajay's friend and classmate, however, was fair, with curly hair and a little on the chubby side. Very immaculate and neat, in the maroon blazer with
the shining brass buttons down to the polished shoes gleaming on his feet, Nawab Rustom Ali Khan was ever the perfect model of elegance.

"Don’t worry, friend. Inshah Allah, he will soon be here," said Rustom.

The three friends, Ajay, Rustom and Dipak, were studying at the same boarding school. This summer Dipak had invited them to his home in the hills. His mother had a farm and an orchard near a little village in Himachal Pradesh. Dipak’s father, now dead, had been a good friend of Richa and Ajay Sahai’s parents. They had allowed Richa to go on the trip too.

"Chhote Nawab, please sit on this bench. I have dusted it for you." The man who spoke was a short, elderly man in khaki uniform. A crisply starched red turban rested on his head. As Nawab Rustom Ali Khan’s assistant-cum-bodyguard, Ahmed always remained close to his master and followed him everywhere, providing great amusement to the children and much embarrassment to Rustom.

"Your milk, Chhote Nawab," said the man, opening a thermos and pouring out the steaming liquid.

"Oh, drink it yourself!" Rustom made such a face that Richa burst into giggles.

"Your laughter is rather inopportune," admonished Ajay sternly. "Dipak’s non-arrival in addition to the gathering darkness, and the loneliness of the surroundings, are causing us too much anxiety. How can you laugh at such a moment?" Ajay was obviously worried. He peered into the gathering darkness, nervously pulling at his jeans.

"How quiet and lonely it is. The mist makes it even more ghostly," said Rustom, a shiver in his voice.
Richa noticed too. The place was a ghost town. The single main street was empty, the shutters down in the shops. The mist, creeping up the distant valleys, had shrouded the hills and trees in a ghostly veil. She shuddered. "We must do something. It is so dark. We can't just hang around here."

Rustom pointed at the faint points of light that glimmered high up above them on the peak of the hill beside which they stood. The lights glowed through the swirling mist. "Is that a hotel?" he asked.

"Looks like it! There is a signboard," pointed out Ajay, "Palace Hotel, it says."

"Shall we try the hotel?" asked Rustom.

"I am sure we cannot afford it," said Richa. She bit her lip as she realized that Rustom, at least, could. His father was the head of a former princely state in Uttar Pradesh. Because of good business investments, his family had made a lot of money and lived in a huge mansion in Delhi. The boy had travelled all over the world with his parents and was quite at home in expensive hotels.

"Ahmed, stay here and watch the luggage. We will be back soon," ordered Rustom. Better to stay at the hotel than to shiver here in the cold, he had decided.

"Yes, but first drink your milk. Or your mother, the Begum Sahiba, will be most annoyed," said Ahmed.

"There is no Begum Sahiba here to scold us," laughed Rustom. "Come on, let us go to the hotel."

The evening had darkened into night already. Ajay pulled out a torch and shone it on the stony path. It led up, through the mist. The grey clouds swirled around them, touching their hands and faces with a cool and clammy dampness.
The Accident

The path took a turn, twisted, and rose steeply upwards. Richa looked down into the mist at the pale streetlights. Far away she caught a glimpse of a moving shape. A little later she heard a sound. "A jeep?" she asked excitedly.

It was. A voice floated out. "Where is everybody?"

Dipak Pant had arrived at last!

Ajay jerked his tight trousers loose and rushed headlong down the slope, followed by Rustom. Richa followed slowly, since Ajay had run off, torch in hand, leaving her alone to stumble in the darkness. By the time she reached the road, their luggage had already been loaded into the jeep by Ahmed and the driver.

"Welcome, welcome, most honoured Dipak Sir," Rustom bowed low in an exaggerated show of respect. "We are indeed grateful at your arrival, My Lord."

"Sorry, everyone," Dipak looked sheepish, "sorry, I am late."

"The delay in your arrival caused us great tension," accused Ajay. "We were forced to conclude that you had not received our missive."

"Miss...? Oh, I got it all right. Come on, I said I am sorry. A rather strange thing happened. In the middle of the journey we realized there was something
wrong with the brake. Just think. Without proper brakes on the mountain roads... It is so dangerous. We had to get it repaired. That is why we are late."

"All right, forgiven," said Rustom, "shall we eat something at the hotel before we start?"

"No, it is already dark. We have a long way to go," answered Dipak, "my mother must be waiting."

They all piled into the back of the jeep and munched the sandwiches which Dipak's mother had so thoughtfully packed for them. There was a cake, some halwa, and a bagful of rosy apples. Ahmed handed around mugs full of hot milk which now seemed most welcome.

It was an eerie journey through mist and darkness. The jeep moved at a snail's pace, for the winding road was veiled in fog so thick that nothing was visible beyond a few yards. The jeep laboured up the steep slopes, screeching and groaning. The gravelled path was very narrow. Richa was horrified to see the black void that gaped just next to her. One mistake, one wrong turn on the invisible road, and they would plunge headlong into the khud (ditch).

Richa's heart thudded each time she heard the horn of a vehicle approaching from the opposite direction. Their jeep slowed to a halt, scraped the mountainside or veered right to the edge.

The road soon became narrower. High walls of rock, rising right above their heads, loomed close on either side.

"Creepy, is it not?" muttered Rustom.

"Only because it is dark and foggy," explained Dipak, "during the day everything looks harmless."

The jeep clattered over stones and pebbles that
littered the road. The driver slowed down. Suddenly there was a loud, strange rumble. Before Richa could ask what it was, she heard Ahmed’s terrified scream, "Be careful!"

Ajay lunged forward and pulled Richa down to the floor of the jeep. Rustom and Dipak screamed. The driver braked. With a loud screech the jeep swung to one side. It scraped against the rocky hillside, swerved, and careened madly across the road. Richa closed her eyes as her head banged against the iron seat. Before she could recover, she was crushed under the weight of the two boys who fell on top of her.

"What...?" she cried, dazed.

There was more to come. "Cr...rr...r...ash, roa...rrr," she heard strange, unknown sounds she could not understand. She was pinned under the seat, her eyes shut tight in fear. The whole mountain seemed to be crashing down on them. After a long time the noises died down. At last she dared to open her eyes.

"Chhote Nawab, are you all right?" came Ahmed’s voice. What a relief it was to hear it.

"Everyone okay?" That was Dipak.

"Allah be thanked, I am," whispered a dazed voice from under the seat.

"Destiny has been kind indeed. But what was that terrible noise? It sounded like doomsday," came Ajay’s voice out of the dark. "Richa, where are you?"

"Here," whispered the girl.

Dipak jumped out to investigate. "A landslide! Just missed us by inches! Phew!" he shouted.

"Good that Ahmed screamed a warning. Just in time," remarked Rustom.
"And the driver very skilfully escaped the falling boulders," added Ajay. Rustom jumped out. Ahmed rushed to him. He hovered over the boy, dusting his clothes, patting back his hair and murmuring anxious enquiries.

"Oh, I am all right, Ahmed. I do wish you would not fuss so much!" Impatiently Rustom pushed him aside and ran to join Ajay, who peeped into the black space below.

"Look, if we had moved just one inch more this side we would have plunged into that dark abyss!" Ajay's voice was just a whisper but it reached Richa's ears.

"Abyss...what do you mean?" She ran to see. One of the front wheels of the jeep teetered unsteadily at the edge of a deep precipice. Her brother was right, the jeep had pulled up just in time.

Dust and debris, small pebbles, bushes and branches still rolled down the hillside. Silently the passengers pushed the vehicle back to the road. They had managed to steer clear of the rushing mass of rock and earth.

The jeep had escaped with minor dents and scratches, those inside were safe too. Relieved, they crept back to their seats. Too dazed to talk the three children remained silent as the jeep resumed its slow and tortuous journey across the mountains.

"Why did it happen, Dipak?" asked Richa at last after she had got over the shock.

"It had rained heavily yesterday the whole day. In fact, there was a cloudburst. Perhaps that was the reason," speculated Dipak.

"You mean there is a landslide every time it rains?" Rustom could not believe it.
"No, I don't mean that. You see there is not enough vegetation here. Landslides are more frequent in areas where there are no plants to hold the soil together. But I also wonder..."

"What?" prodded Richa.

"I...am not sure. Did someone deliberately...try to harm...? No, no... How is it possible?" Dipak gave a nervous little laugh and did not continue.

A brooding silence settled over the group. No one spoke, and the jeep continued to speed through the darkness.
Noises in the Night

The road dipped into a valley. Soon a cluster of dim lights showed through the mist. They halted before a little shop nestling at the foot of a slope.

"Have we reached?" asked Richa excitedly

"Almost. We must get down here. The jeep cannot go any further. We will have to walk the rest of the way," answered Dipak.

"Walk?" cried three shocked voices together. Rustom straightened his tie and blazer. "Do not joke, friend. Is there no proper road to your farm?" he asked in dismay.

"No. It is nothing, just an hour's walk. It may look difficult at night, but I do it all the time," Dipak tried to reassure them.

"Nevertheless, I think we have had enough excitement for the day. I suggest we continue the journey in the morning when we can at least see where we are going. Let us spend the night in the jeep, Dipak," decided Ajay.

"Well, if you do not want to go now, we can sleep in this shop. My mother knows the owner who supplies us with our provisions. The driver can go up with our luggage. He will tell Mummy that we have stopped here for the night," said Dipak, jumping down to make the arrangements.
The owner of the shop-cum-eating place, Motilal, was an old man with a thousand wrinkles on his sunburnt cheeks. He quickly dished up a spicy curry of mushrooms and tomatoes, with chapatis baked crisp on the wood fire. Everybody relished the tasty meal.

Ahmed spread out their bedding on the floor. The little room, crowded with pots and pans, sacks of potatoes and flour, and tins of oil and spices was soon transformed into a cosy bedroom. Snug under their blankets they all fell asleep instantly.

It was the middle of the night. Richa woke up with a start. What had disturbed her? The strangeness of the new place frightened her, until she heard her brother's gentle snores. All was hushed, the world covered in a blanket of darkness.

Thuck-thuck, the sounds seemed to come from a distance. Prr-grr...this sounded nearer. It was the purring of a vehicle. What was it doing here so late at night? Other sounds followed. Crunch, went someone's footsteps. Shhhshhh...hushed whispers, thump-crash, ghrr-whrrr, rrrrr...it was impossible to muffle the mysterious noises. Dare she tiptoe to the window to see what it was all about? No, it was none of her business. It was warm and comfortable inside the blanket anyway. She covered her ears and tried to return to the world of dreams.

The gay chirping of birds was the next sound Richa heard. Ajay tickled the soles of her feet. "Wake up, sleepyhead. We must complete the next stage of the great journey," he said.

"Will we ever reach, friend?" asked Rustom. He was already dressed and ready, eager to continue.
"Oh, am I the last to wake up?" cried Richa. She sprang out of bed. The sun was streaming in through the tiny window. In the front room Motilal’s plump, red-cheeked wife bent over the smoky fire, above which simmered a black kettle.

"Tea, dear?" the old lady flashed them a toothless smile.

"Chhote Nawab does not drink the nasty brew," Ahmed said scornfully. "Don't you have some fresh milk?"

"Come on, you will get everything up at the farm. Let us go. Mummy is waiting," urged Dipak.

How beautiful and sunny everything looked in the morning. The sky was a bright azure, flecked delicately with fluffy clouds. It was such a change from last night's mist and gloom, thought Richa. Then she remembered. "What were those strange sounds at night?" she asked Motilal.

The genial smile on the old man’s face vanished. "Sounds? I did not hear any. I slept in the front room and would have surely heard," he said, nodding his grey head.

Motilal's wife looked up from her cooking and muttered, "You have been dreaming. It happens when you sleep in a new place. There were no noises, I assure you."

Richa was shocked. She had not blamed the old people for the noises. Then why this rush to hide what she had heard but not bothered much about? "But..." she began, when Dipak hurried her out of the shop. It was getting late, his mother was waiting, he urged. Puzzled, she followed the others down the street. Should she tell them about the strange incident? No,
they were sure to scoff at her suspicions. Richa decided to keep her secret to herself and ran to join the others.

The boys had reached the foot of a hill. Dipak stopped and pointed at the hillside. "We have to climb now. Richa, shall I help you?"

Three pairs of incredulous eyes blinked at him. "What? Up this muddy slope? Are you out of your mind? What about our clothes? They will get so dirty!" cried Rustom brushing down his expensive trousers.

Ahmed rushed to his side. "Chhote Nawab may slip and break his leg. What face will I show to the Begum Sahiba?"

Ajay gamely pulled up his jeans and placed one foot carefully and hesitatingly on the slippery slope. "Well, I do it almost everyday I am here!" laughed Dipak. "It is not that difficult, not really. It is just a little steep in the beginning. It is because the rain has washed down the track. It will become better as we climb on."

"Okay, here I go!" said Richa. She placed her feet on a flat stone and then climbed onto a jutting root. Carefully she took a few steps more. The next to try was Rustom. Ajay had already climbed up.

Soon the group was walking, single file, along a very narrow footpath that skirted the hillside.
The Trek

The track, cut along the sides of the hill, climbed steeply upwards. At first the children were hesitant. As they gained confidence, they started taking brisk steps. The fragrant smell of the pines, the clear, fresh air and the cloudless sky lifted their spirits. The boys whistled, even Richa hummed under her breath. They had begun to enjoy the difficult walk.

"Oh look, a sight fit for gods!" exclaimed Ajay, stopping to admire the view, "snow shimmering on distant peaks...range upon range of green hills...and the ribbon of blue down below in the valley."

"Do not look down...it makes my head spin," complained Rustom, puzzled, a sick expression on his face.

"Don’t tell me you get vertigo!" exclaimed Dipak. "Don't worry. Keep your eyes on the path and do not look towards the valleys."

"I feel so funny," said Rustom.

Ahmed hurried close to help, but the path was not wide enough for two. "Let me carry you, Chhote Nawab," he held out his arms.

Richa and Ajay burst into laughter. Rustom’s chubby cheeks flushed a deep red. "No, no. I can walk, for Allah’s sake! I am not an invalid, Ahmed. Just stay behind. I will not be able to look around, that is all."
It was a long walk. Richa was soon tired. She leaned against the hillside and wiped her face. Ajay, too, had flopped down on a boulder to rest.

Dark fir trees, their trunks green with moss and lichen, soared tall, trying to reach the skies. It felt cool and pleasant under the shade of the trees. The pine needles lay inches deep on the path. The slopes were covered with mountain ferns, snake gourds and rhododendron bushes. Violets peeked modestly from between the rocks. Brilliantly coloured yellow, brown and orange mushrooms raised their round heads here and there above the damp leaves. Above them, the leaves and branches were woven into a lacy canopy, through which shafts of golden sunlight filtered through to dapple the emerald foliage.

"Come on, we have rested too long! Let us go, we are very close to my house," urged Dipak, trying to make them hurry.

It was time to move on. Up they climbed. Soon they left the thick forest behind and emerged on the top of the hill. The mountain ranges were visible again. The road that had brought them to the village could be glimpsed far below, winding its way along the slopes of the rugged mountains. There were no other signs of civilization. It began to seem to the tired girl that they would just continue to climb and climb, going deeper and deeper into the strange wilderness.

"Are we ever going to reach?" Richa was quite breathless by now and sounded desperate.

"What a place to stay, friend! How can anyone live here?" wondered Rustom.

"Oh, but I love it!" cried Dipak. "It is so wild and lonely and beautiful. I feel sometimes that I am the
only person left in the world. It is a wonderful feeling. I have roamed so much in the wild woods that I know every stone, every tree in the area."

"All right, travellers, let us carry on, however heavy the burden. Ours is not to wonder why, ours is just to do and die!" grinned Ajay, quoting a poem he had learnt at school. Laughing, Rustom and Richa followed the two others up the steep hill.

As they walked around the next bend, they came across steps made of grey slate and a low wall.

"Civilization at last!" cried Ajay, running forward, "have we reached?"

"Oh no, that is Ambar Bagh, Das Uncle’s farm. He is our nearest neighbour," informed Dipak.

"What about your farm, Dipak? When will we reach? Phew, it is so hot," complained Rustom. Ahmed rushed towards him to relieve him of his blazer, which Rustom was happy to hand over. He took a sip of water from the thermos carried by Ahmed and handed it to the others too.

Dipak waved an arm vaguely towards the mountains. "There it is. Not too far now. Come on!"

The track ran along the wall for about half a mile, and then climbed up again. At last they seemed to reach the top of a hill. Thickly wooded ranges and lush green valleys stretched out below them.

Richa had expected the top to be a pointed peak or flat like a table. How surprised she was when she saw the rolling meadows before her! The grass, thick and green, was sprinkled lavishly with pale yellow daisies. "How pretty!" she gasped, delighted.

"Isn’t it?" Dipak looked proud, as if it was he who
was responsible for the beautiful sight. "Now you see why I love my home? It is the most beautiful place in the whole world!" He spun around on his heel, danced a few steps and then ran, lightly and happily, across the green meadows.

"A vast golf course, right on top of the mountain! Wait till my father sees this! He will go crazy with excitement!" shouted Rustom.

"See the flowers? Like golden stars sprinkled on green velvet..." murmured the poetic Ajay.

There was a spring now in their feet as the children raced happily up and down the meadows. Up another rise and peach trees appeared on either side of a narrow path. Through a broken gate into more rolling meadows, past a pool circled by a stone wall, then past a huge oak tree with its branches spread wide, its leaves casting flickering shadows over the water in the pool...and then, at last, they saw the long, low building on top of the hill. It had sloping roofs covered with grey slate, thick wooden beams and white-washed walls. They had reached at last!

"We are home!" shouted Dipak. His shout caused the front door to burst open. A white and brown dog with long, shaggy hair leapt out, barking excitedly. A lady in a white sari followed him.

"There you are!" she looked relieved and happy. "I was wondering... hey, down, Moti! Do not frighten the children."

The dog leapt and sniffed at each in turn. Ahmed rushed to protect his charge. Moti, who did not seem to approve of strangers, jumped at Ahmed, sniping and growling.

"Chhote Nawab, watch out!" the dutiful bodyguard
pulled Rustom out of harrrrr's way. His action aroused
the dog's suspicions. He leapt at the visitors, teeth
bared, barking furiously. Richa screamed and raced
off to a safe distance. Ajay leapt onto a chair.

Dipak ran and grabbed the dog’s collar but Moti
slipped out of his grasp and lunged towards Rustom.
Ahmed swept Rustom up in his arms. Embarrassed,
the boy hit out at him. "Ahmed, put me down, at
once!" he shouted. At the same time he kicked wildly
to fend off the dog.

The arrival of the guests had caused the wildest
confusion possible!

"Stand still, all of you, then he won’t jump at you.
Moti, stop it, they are friends!" shouted Mrs. Pant at
the top of her voice. It had its effect. Moti, looking
sulky at being called off, withdrew from the game.
Dipak caught the dog’s collar and there was peace
at last.

"Welcome to Srivatika!" Mrs. Pant smiled at the
children, "I am sorry for the chaotic welcome."

"Mummy, are you all right?" Richa caught the note
of anxiety in Dipak’s voice.

She was relieved when his mother answered with
a cheerful smile. "Of course, I am. Moti and Hari
Singh take good care of me. You should not worry."

Dipak’s face cleared, the frown on his forehead
vanished. "I am glad, Mummy," was all that he said.
But Richa had noticed with surprise that there was
such relief in his voice! Though he had not said
a word, obviously he had been terribly worried about
his mother. Why? Was she in some danger?
In the Garden

The children had a hearty breakfast of puri, potato curry and glasses of fresh milk.

"Take your friends to the garden, Dipak. Show them around the place," suggested Mrs. Pant after they were all settled.

Dipak led his friends out. He showed them the terraced fields that sloped down into the valley on the southern side. "We grow potatoes and tomatoes there. And that is Gopi, the gardener, who looks after the crops." He pointed at the slim lad bending over the tomatoes. "Hey Gopi...how are you?"

Gopi was too busy to answer. He nodded at the guests and bent lower over the plants. Dipak led them to the other side of the house. "Here are the apple trees. We sell the apples," he pointed out.

Just then a boy in a Himachali cap jumped down in front of Dipak. "Oh...Shibu! Where were you all this while?" Dipak caught the boy's hand and shook it.

"Looking after my friends, of course," laughed Shibu. He was a small, sprightly lad with a mop of curly hair escaping his embroidered cap. Hari Singh, the driver and odd-job man in the house, was his father. Shibu had a job too. It was to guard the orchard against thieves, animal as well as human!

"Meet my friends. I mean, my enemies!" grinned
the boy, pointing at the horde of monkeys that had invaded the orchard. He charged at them with his stick. Moti followed, barking angrily. He leapt towards a fat simian, who turned around and made faces at the dog. Shibu chased it away. The dog and the boy soon rid the orchard of the unwanted guests.

"Let us climb trees. I love to watch the world sitting high up on a branch. That tree is my favourite," said Dipak. "You can choose branches too. Richa, I think this one is just right for you. Want help?"

Richa shook her head. The trees were low, their branches easy to reach. Ajay climbed up and perched among the leaves, peering down at Rustom, who hesitated. Should he dirty his clothes or not, he seemed to wonder.

"Don’t, Chhote Nawab!" they heard a shout. It was Ahmed who looked alarmed. He ran towards the boy. "You will break an arm or a leg. You will fall. What will I tell Begum Sahiba then?" He caught Rustom’s arm. The boy quickly made up his mind. He flung off the hand and shinned up the tree-trunk in a trice. Soon he was safely out of reach on one of the higher branches.

"Well done!" clapped the others. "Here is your reward!" Dipak threw a green apple at the boy, which Rustom deftly caught.

Richa swung gently on the branch, the rustling and the murmuring of the leaves providing soft music in the background. It was so pleasant there among the trees. She began to hum her favourite tune and then her eyes fell on Dipak. There was a frown on his face. His gaze, fixed on his house in the distance, was anxious and worried.
"Is something wrong, Dipak?" puzzled, Richa asked, concern in her voice.
"Wh...what do you mean?" the boy stammered.
"Something is worrying you. Is it to do with your mother?" asked Richa shrewdly.
"She is right. You are not your usual self. Is there a problem? Is it serious?" asked Ajay.
"I don't know if there is any problem. It is like this, you see, Papa once told me, that I should look after mummy. I feel responsible for her safety. She stays alone. I did not even want to go to the hostel. But my mother insisted. Since there is no proper school here and she wanted me to have a good education..." explained Dipak.
"Naturally. You must attend school," agreed Ajay.
"Good you joined, friend. Or we may never have met you," smiled Rustom.
"Let him finish, please!" Richa scolded the boys for interrupting. "Well, what makes you so worried?"
"Our house is in a deserted place, far away from everywhere. And of late many strange things have happened."
"Like what?"
"Little incidents and accidents and now the failure of the jeep's brake, the horrible landslide."
Ajay laughed heartily, "A landslide is a natural phenomenon. You said so yourself. It may occur where there are no trees and plants to hold the soil. How can you blame it on human mischief?"
"Sometimes, a boulder or a rock pushed by someone may roll down, gathering loose stuff on the way. It may turn into a landslide," said Dipak.
"Just your feverish imagination! How can you base
suspicions on such vague ideas?" laughed Ajay.

"Besides, your mother was not even there!" pointed out Rustom.

"She could have been," insisted Dipak. "Mummy was to use the jeep for going to Shimla. And then your letter came. She sent me in the jeep to fetch you. She stayed at home to make the place ready for your arrival."

"Where is the jeep usually parked?" asked Ajay.

"Down in the village, near Motilal’s shop. Hari Singh, our driver, says it was perfectly all right the last time he drove it. He too believes that someone has tampered with the brakes," Dipak’s face darkened again with anxiety.

It made Richa wonder, were Dipak’s fears justified? Was his mother really in some kind of danger? The pleasant orchard with its green apples suddenly seemed like a sinister place where danger lurked for its inhabitants. A sudden cold shiver ran down her body. Meanwhile, Shibu, who had been away chasing the monkeys from the tomato plants, returned. Richa was glad to see his cheerful grin again.
"Dipak! I want to show you something. Come with me." Shibu called out.
"May I come too?" asked Richa, jumping down.
"Can we also come?" shouted the two boys.
Shibu looked at them suspiciously, "I want to show it to you only," he told Dipak.
"They are my friends. You can trust them. Come, we will all go," decided Dipak.
Ahmed, who sat under a tree at a distance, keeping a watchful eye on Rustom, jumped to his feet.
"Not him!" Shibu hissed loudly in Dipak's ears.
"But, Chhote Nawab, where are you off to? The Begum Sahiba told me to stay with you," Ahmed appealed to Rustom.
"Did she not tell you to look after my meals too? Please go to the kitchen and see to it," said Rustom.
"As you desire, sir," Ahmed obeyed but looked utterly reluctant and miserable.
"Follow me!" shouted Shibu, racing across the meadows, followed closely by Dipak. The others struggled to keep pace with the children from the mountains.
"Where have they disappeared?" asked Richa a few moments later.

"Don't they know we are new? We don't know the way!" and Rustom stood still. All they could see were the pines and firs, and the snow-capped mountains beyond. "D...i...i..pak! Shibu! Where are you?" Their calls struck the mountains and returned in echoes, "Are you? A...you?"

"Shibu! Shibu!"

"Boo! Boo!" came the echo.

Suddenly Dipak's face peeped out from behind a tree. "Come on, you slowpokes! I climbed all the way up again. You took so long!"

"Wait for us," Richa insisted, "we cannot go as fast as you can. You belong here and are used to the terrain. We are not!"

This time the boy went slowly down the slope, taking care to see that the others followed. They trod carefully on the slippery ground, passing tall ferns and the red rhododendrons, placing their feet on firm rocks. Rustom grumbled loudly every time he slipped. Ajay found a stick to cling firmly on to.

Shibu appeared again. "You take too long. Come on," he urged and then raced off again.

They soon reached a valley. Pine trees and the bright blue flowers of the hydrangea adorned the gently sloping banks. Round pebbles and big boulders were scattered on the floor of the valley. Obviously a stream had once meandered across. They followed the path cut by the stream until they reached another hill. After they had climbed up a few feet Shibu suddenly halted. "We have reached," he announced.

A huge boulder lay before them. Shibu stretched
across it and peeped into a hole in the mountainside. "Come and see," he invited the others.

All that Richa could see was pitch darkness.
"Nice hole, friend," Rustom patted Shibu's back, "but is it really worth all the trouble?"
"He is just fooling us. There is something more here than just a hole. Out with the secret, Shibu!" laughed Dipak.
"You guessed right. I plugged the opening with the boulder. We must roll it aside," said Shibu.
Everyone helped to move the heavy boulder aside. Behind it was a large opening, leading into a small cave.
"Can we enter the precincts?" asked Ajay.
"Precincts?" wondered Dipak.
"What I mean is, can we go in?" explained Ajay with a laugh.
"No bats to fly into our faces, I suppose?" asked Rustom worriedly.
Dipak did not answer. He rushed in through the opening pushing everyone out of the way.
"Wow! Great!" came Dipak's astonished voice from inside.
Everyone crowded around the opening. Richa peeped in and was stunned at what she saw. The three stepped hesitatingly into the cave and gasped at the wondrous sight.
"God is great!" Rustom's awed sigh broke the silence. Ajay, the one with the richest vocabulary, stood dumbstruck.
There were no treasures there, nor were there heaps of pearls or gems. No gold or silver-filled chests, yet all agreed the cave was a marvellous find. The walls
glowed with a strange luminosity, sparkles twinkling at spots that caught the sunlight that streamed in through the opening.


"What do the walls consist of? Gems, precious stones, gold or silver?" asked Ajay. He had found his voice at last. He ran his fingers over the rocky wall. "Smoo...oo...th. And, look, the stone is neither grey nor brown, in fact, it is coloured."

Pale shades of pink, lemon, green and blue streaked the walls of the cave.

"Wonder what makes up the structure of this rock. Do scientists know about it? A geologist should do some research here," said Ajay.

"No, no! No geologist must come here. This is my secret. You are not to tell anyone," cried Shibu, shaking his head so violently that his cap fell off.

Richa was surprised to see him so agitated. "But surely you want everyone to hear of your great discovery, Shibu. Just think, you will become famous as the boy who found the wonder cave."

"No, no!" the great discoverer picked up his cap and set it firmly on his head. "People will come here. They will snoop and dig. They might even want to take away my beautiful rocks."

"He is right. People will hack away at the cave wall, may even want to sell the rocks. Shibu, I hope you have not told anyone," asked Dipak anxiously.

"No...except...my father. He helped me roll the boulder to hide the opening. But I do not think he will tell anyone or will he?" wondered Shibu.

Ajay wandered off. His voice emerged from the far
end of the cave, "It does not end here. It narrows down into a tunnel and then goes deeper into the mountainside."

"Do not go in, Ajay!" shouted Richa.

"No question. Not without a torch or something. The place certainly needs further exploration," Ajay shouted back.

"We will come again. Armed with torches and lights," promised Dipak. "Let us go back now. Mummy must be wondering where we are. Let us hurry back. Come!"
Visitors

It was getting late. The children raced back towards the house. Loud voices reached their ears as they walked in through the gates. Rustom's eyebrows shot upwards in a puzzled question. "Who are they?" he whispered, pointing at the people in the verandah.

"Mr. Hari Lall and his wife Pamela. They have returned recently from America after several years. Let us see what they want," explained Dipak in a low voice.

Ajay pulled hard at his jeans, trying to stretch them down. He put on his best face, with the polite expression he reserved specially for strangers.

"Hi Dipak!" boomed a loud, hearty voice. A man, dressed in a pink and blue striped T-shirt, waved at them from the verandah.

"Hi kids, where were you?" asked the lady in the dark glasses who stood behind the young man. She had a weird hairdo, streaked a bright red, and lots of makeup on her face. "Are these your friends? A girlfriend too, I see!" she said, pointing at Richa.

Somehow Richa liked neither the smile the woman gave her, nor the wink which accompanied it.

"Yes, this is my friend Ajay Sahai, Richa, his sister, and this is Rustom," Dipak remembered his manners.

"India has turned modern, eh? Girls freely visit
their boyfriends. It certainly is a big step forward for our country, eh!” said the lady with another wink at the girl- Richa made up her mind. She definitely did not like the Lalls, especially Mrs. Lall.

Ajay stepped forward. "My parents have allowed my sister to accompany us here because they are well acquainted with Pant Aunty. Our parents and the Pants have been good friends for many years, and so my people have complete trust in Aunty Pant," he explained in a stiff voice.

"Ha, ha! What a strange lad!” laughed Mrs. Lall, staring at Ajay, who fiddled with the sleeves of his shirt in an embarrassed manner.

"Quite odd," agreed the husband.

Angry, Richa looked for Mrs. Pant, but she had disappeared into the house.

"But kids, let me introduce ourselves. I am Harry. Ha...a...rrry Lall," he drawled. "And this is my da...rrrling wife, Pamela. We have come back from the United States. We wanted to do something for our country. So we returned, ready to do our bit for dear India!” He repeated the last sentence and smirked at Dipak. "Your Mom did not like it, but I just gave her a very good offer. You may ask her about it. We must leave now. But don't worry. We will be back again. Come on, Pamela. Goodbye kids; take care!"

Mrs. Pant reappeared as soon as the two vanished beyond the distant trees. Her lips were set tight, and her eyes were grim.

"What happened, Mummy? You do not look very happy. Did they say something to you?” Dipak gave her an anxious glance.

"They certainly did," answered his mother angrily,
"They wanted to buy my home. They offered a good price too."

"I hope you refused," said Dipak anxiously.

"Of course I did!" Mrs. Pant’s voice was emphatic. She walked back into the house. Shaken, she sank onto a sofa. Richa rushed to get her a glass of water. Rustom and Ajay hung around, looking puzzled. Moti wriggled close to his mistress, who patted him gently.

"Do sit down, all of you," she said at last. Dipak rushed to sit close to his mother on the sofa. Mrs. Pant stroked his shoulder as she sipped the water. "Thank you, Richa. You must be wondering why I am so upset. This land, you see, belonged to my husband’s family. He really loved it. He wanted to come and live here after he retired from the Army, but he died guarding our front. I take it as my sacred duty to preserve this place in all its pristine beauty. I will never sell it. Never!"

Dipak looked solemn. "We won’t, Mummy."

"Why do they want to buy this place, Aunty?" asked Rustom.

"They like its location. With the wonderful view of the snowy peaks in the north, the gentle terraced slopes to the south and the rolling meadows around..." began the lady.

"Oh yes, the meadows make a perfect golf course!" interrupted Rustom.

"But...were they not correct in their judgment? This place will make an excellent tourist spot if properly developed," said Ajay.

"Just what they plan to do," said Mrs. Pant. "That is, develop the place. With motorable roads, a hotel with all modern facilities including a swimming pool,
a gym, an amusement park, a water park and"

"Isn't that a fantastic idea?" exclaimed Rustom.
"Exactly what the place needs. Roads, swimming pool, golf club...TV and video games...it will be as posh as any holiday resort abroad."
"I agree. Making the place accessible..." began Ajay.
"Axes?" interrupted Rustom.
"I mean, so that it is easy to reach. Walking all the way yip here was really exhausting. Remember, Richa, how tired you were?"

"Hmm," mumbled the girl doubtfully. Though tired, she had actually enjoyed the long walk. If they had whizzed past in a car they would surely have missed the many fascinating sights they had seen.
"Somehow, I liked the walk," she ventured to say.

"I always enjoy it greatly," said Dipak. "I like stepping on the crunchy pine needles. I love the cool damp feeling you get when you walk under the shady oaks. I can hunt for pine cones, pluck fat mushrooms, discover new wild flowers. Sometimes, if I am lucky, I can see a beautiful rare bird. It is fun to find new shortcuts. There is always an exciting discovery to be made, like..." Suddenly he stopped. He had remembered the latest find, the cave.

"Exactly. Surely you do not want the enchanting, fairy tale woods to sprout ugly modern structures all over? Or the mysterious, secret pathways to vanish, only to be replaced instead by sleek, tarred roads?" asked Mrs. Pant.

"No, I like it as it is—silent, mysterious, magical!" Dipak nodded vehemently.

"You mean, it is more exciting and adventurous as it is? Development will spoil it? Maybe you are right.
Perhaps we cannot appreciate this because we are used to living in the city,” said Ajay.

"Right, dear. This place is not just a legacy from my husband. It is a gift from nature. The Lalls want to turn it into a man-made horror. Hari Lall showed me his plans. Ugh, hotels six storeys high, a network of roads, a shopping mall, restaurants. So I turned down the offer. He and Pamela did not want to take no for an answer. Finally, I lost my temper. I pushed that woman out of the room," confessed Mrs. Pant.

Richa giggled, pleased. But Rustom shook his head. "I have seen some fabulous resorts. People live in great style. Everything is available there. Life is fun there for the tourists," he commented.

"Life is fun here too, though there is nothing like what you mentioned," said Dipak.

The door opened and Ahmed came in, carrying a tray. "Your juice, Chhote Nawab. I could not get any other drink. No cokes, no cold drinks. Such a problem it was to prepare this. The electricity went off. I had to squeeze the fruit by hand. Now you must drink it! Don’t say ‘go drink it yourself’.”

Everyone laughed. "I won’t. I need the juice. I hope there is enough for all," said Rustom, reaching gratefully for the glass.
An Intruder

Another night in a new bed, thought Richa as she lay under the quilt. Rustom and Ajay slept in a guest room downstairs while her bed was put up in the upstairs study that overlooked the front garden. Tired after the long day, she promptly fell asleep.

What was that? The unfamiliar sounds pulled her out of her dreams. Thuck-thuck! She had heard it once before too, she remembered vaguely. Oh yes, last night, at Motilal’s shop. She sat up and looked out of the window near her bed. The moonlight shone over the tall poplar trees far away across the patch of lawn. The hedge and bushes were dark and ghostly, the leaves and flowers were tipped with silver. The garden was bathed in the silvery, magical moonlight. Unfamiliar but sweet scents wafted in with the breeze. She lifted up her nose to smell but froze as another sound reached her.

Click! It was the garden gate. Who came at this time, when everyone slept? Footsteps stole along the path, then halted. Richa waited for the ring of the bell, the knock at the door, but there were no such sounds. Instead came cautious, hesitant footfalls, followed by strange scratching sound and soft mysterious noises she could not understand. Silence again. She waited. Nothing more was heard for several minutes.
'I am dreaming,' thought Richa, pulling the quilt over her head. She was drifting off to sleep when she heard low, soft growls. Moti!

"Hush, Moti, go to sleep!" That was Dipak, who slept in Mrs. Pant's bedroom. Then came a loud crash. Richa flung off the quilt and ran to the door. Other voices, other noises broke the silence of the night.

"What was that?" cried Mrs. Pant. Moti's barking rose to a hysterical pitch.

Someone had broken into the house. Everyone was awake. The boys sprang out of bed and rushed out of their rooms. Richa heard footsteps crunch across the bushes under her window and jumped to see the person. A dark shadow slid out of a side door. The figure raced down the lawn towards the hedge. One wild leap and the figure had vanished. The lawn, bathed in moonlight, was empty again.

"Let Moti catch him!" came Dipak's shout. "Let him nab the thief."

Richa saw the dog chase the man, but it was too late. The man managed to shake off the dog. Moti returned, head low, looking most ashamed.

"Couldn't you catch him? Who was it?" asked Dipak agitated.

"A thief. Who else?" said Rustom.

"What did he want to steal?" asked Ajay.

"Anyway, there is nothing of much value here," said Mrs. Pant. "I never keep any jewellery. And everyone knows I don't keep cash in the house."

Richa ran down to join the others. "I saw him! I saw him!" she shouted excitedly. "I saw the man through my window. He was short and slim. His shoes flashed in the moonlight. They were white."
"Those clues are no help. White shoes may be worn by anyone. Richa, you are the only witness. Think hard. Did you notice anything else?" asked Ajay.

Richa closed her eyes, trying to remember. In the darkness she had only seen the man’s outline. His back was towards her. She would not recognize him if she ever came face to face with him. Yet, there had been something. What was it, she just could not remember.

"Pant Aunty, do you have any enemies?" asked Rustom. "If it was not a thief after money or jewellery, could it be someone trying to scare you for some reason or other?"

"That is Dipak’s apprehension," explained Ajay. "He is dreadfully frightened. He feels someone is attempting to deliberately frighten, if not harm you. He is very worried for you."

Mrs. Pant gave her son a sharp look making him squirm and go red.

"No, no! I never meant that. I never said so!" Dipak protested.

"There is nothing to fear," said his mother gently. "I told you, I am quite safe and secure, with Hari Singh and other loyal staff to look after me, and Moti to keep guard. Do you think Moti will allow anyone to come anywhere near me? He will bark his head off, as he did tonight."

"Nevertheless," persisted Ajay, "we must make sure, if only to remove Dipak’s suspicions and to make him feel better. He lives under constant fear imagining you to be in some terrible danger. Do you consider it a possibility? Have you ever had a fight with anyone?"
"I had no fights but a few arguments, certainly. I had one with the Lalls as you well know. I have scolded servants, fought with shopkeepers who tried to cheat me, and battled traders who refused to give the right price for my apples and other crops. Such things have happened from time to time. Especially since your father died, Dipak...I have faced many unpleasant situations. But I have learnt to cope and managed to hold my own," said Mrs. Pant.

Richa looked at the grey-haired lady with admiration. It must be a difficult, lonely life in this remote place, yet she remained cheerful.

"There is no need to worry, kids," Mrs. Pant said firmly. "Back to sleep now. Everything is all right. The thief has run away. I will just take a look at the doors and windows."

"I will come with you, Mummy," said Dipak.

They found one of the doors ajar. Dipak examined it only to discover that the lock had been forced open. The boy's face turned pale. Even Mrs. Pant, though she tried to hide it, looked shaken. Somehow, though worried and anxious, the inmates of the house forced themselves back into bed and a restless sleep.
Exploring the Cave

"Breakfast! Come, come, everybody!" announced Dipak’s mother the next morning.

"Breakfast?" screamed Rustom from his room. "I am still in bed. Ahmed, where are you? Where is my dressing gown? And my shoes?"

"Yes, Chhote Nawab, it is all here. I did not want to wake you... Hari Singh said thieves broke into the house last night. I should have been near you. But you sent me away to the staff quarters. Now Begum Sahiba will be so angry. What will she say?" Ahmed grumbled.

"Don't scold, Ahmed... Where are the shoes?"

"Must you depend on him so much?" asked Ajay. "You dislike his constant presence, yet you require him for every little thing. First try and learn to be independent. Look at me. I manage everything myself. And so does Richa."

Rustom smiled. "I do observe you. I admire your sleek hairstyle. You are so clean and neat that I feel jealous of you. And your shoes are so well polished I can see my face in them. Ha! ha!"  

Ajay was about to throw a slipper at him when Ahmed entered, carrying a pair of gleaming black shoes on a tray! "Here they are, Chhote Nawab, all ready for you."
"Come on, everyone. We are going for a picnic today!" Dipak shouted from the dining room.

"Picnic?" Richa was down in the dining room in two seconds, followed the next moment by the two boys. "Where are we going?"

"Wait and see," said Dipak. "Shibu is coming too. We are taking torches. Does this give you a hint?"

"We are going to...!" began Richa, but stopped hastily when she received a kick from under the table.

A picnic at the wonderful cave, followed by exciting explorations—Richa was eager now to start. She grabbed a few mouthfuls of the homemade cake and pushed back her chair. "Let us go."

The four children were about to leave on their exploration when they heard a voice, "Good morning, Mrs. Pant. How are you? Heard there was a theft at your place last night?" A tall man with grey hair stood outside in the verandah.

"It is Mr. Das from Ambar Bagh, the neighbouring farm. How did he get the news, so early in the morning?" whispered Dipak.

Mr. Das noticed the picnic hamper in Dipak’s hands. "Where are the children off to?" he asked.

"Picnic," said the boy shortly. Mr. Das did not show much curiosity. Instead he turned to Mrs. Pant, "Are you also going, Madam?" he asked.

"No, I have work to do," she answered with a smile, "and the kids have some dark secrets. Even I may not share them. So I shall stay at home."

"We would have liked to take you along, Mummy, but this is something really special," said Dipak.

"It is perfectly fine, son. Mr. Das is here to keep me company. So run along, kids. Have a good time."
Richa was glad Mrs. Pant had company. She felt sorry about leaving her all alone while they had fun. It was good there was a visitor. Surprisingly Dipak did not share her views. "I wish he had not come," he nervously muttered. "Now I shall worry all the time I am away from house."

"Come on," laughed Ajay, "he seems like a nice old gentleman. Surely you do not suspect him of harming your mother."

"Who knows? Someone is after us. He tried to enter our house. I wonder who it was. What did he want?" asked Dipak.

"Your Mom has no enemies. She said so. Now do stop worrying," said Rustom.

They set off for the cave. What a surprise they got when they reached close. The boulder, which they had pushed before the opening, had been rolled aside. The opening of the cave was now exposed.

Shibu's mouth fell open in surprise. "My beautiful secret... it has been discovered!" he cried.

The children rushed towards the cave. There was no one there. But there was enough telltale evidence to show that someone had been present. The loose earth was disturbed. There were footprints that definitely did not belong to the children. As if this was not enough, cigarette stubs and used matchsticks lay scattered on the dusty ground.

"Look, two different types of footprints," observed Richa, staring closely at the marks. "See, this looks like a pair of slippers. And these are shoes."

"How did they find the cave?" wailed poor Shibu. "Never mind, let us begin exploring," said Rustom impatiently.
"Here we go, into the unknown. No one knows what lies beyond in the dark, where no human foot has trod before." There was an explorer's gleam in Ajay's brown eyes.

Richa found that it was pitch dark inside. She could hear the thud-thud of her heart as she followed the others. The tunnel was high enough for Ajay to stand straight without bumping his head. She could feel the cool surface on either side, the tunnel being just broad enough for them to walk in comfortably. The floor was rough. Dipak had to shine the torch to keep them from stumbling on the uneven ground. They did not have to go far though. The tunnel soon opened into a bigger cave.

As Dipak shone the torch on the walls, points of light blinked back at them. The rocks were as beautiful as in the first cave.

The children walked around, exploring, examining, touching the walls with probing fingers, and peeping into dark caverns and holes. It was indeed exciting to discover the several openings that led from the cave. Some were blind, others led deeper into unknown mysterious spaces.

"Enough, enough," said Dipak after a while, "it is the same rock everywhere. There is nothing else...just empty space."

"What a pity—no treasures, buried or hidden!" Rustom sounded disappointed.

"This is more than any treasure. Just imagine the attention it will draw if the world comes to know about it. Whoever owns this area can make millions, just by selling the rocks," said Ajay.

"What do you mean, whoever owns it?" asked
Dipak. "Did I not tell you, this is part of our land? It belongs to us. Our land stretches all the way, till that tree over there. Mummy told me so once."

Richa stared at Dipak with wide, incredulous eyes, "You are a rich boy then. Why, you are as rich as Rustom."

Dipak merely shook his head. "Shall we return? It is late and...!"

"I know. Mummy is alone. She must be worrying," grinned Rustom. "Isn't that what you were about to say?"

"That is not a good joke, Rustom. He has the right to care," scolded Richa as the four walked back the way they had come. Dipak's anxiety led them to walk fast and they were soon back at home.

Mrs. Pant had company again. It never failed to amaze Richa. How did so many visitors turn up at such a remote place? "Who?" she nudged Dipak, curious as usual.

"Motilal, the shopkeeper. Don't you recognize him? You spent the night at his place," whispered Dipak.
"And that tall fellow with the beard?" asked Richa.
"Chowdhari Shivnath, the contractor. He builds houses, and has several other business to look after. I wonder what the two want. Let me go and find out." Dipak ran towards the house. The others, in no mood to be polite to strangers, lingered at the gate.

Fortunately, the two men were about to leave. The bearded fellow threw his cigarette into the flowerbed and bid goodbye to Mrs. Pant. Motilal saw the children standing at the gate and smiled as he recognized them. "So? Do you like it here?" he asked.

Ajay gave his shy half smile and Richa inquired
politely after his wife. Rustom was about to say something when the bearded man, Shivnath, pulled the old man away. "Hurry up. We have a long way to go. Let us not waste time talking to kids."

Richa was indignant. She scowled at the tall bearded man, who strode impatiently past, without taking the slightest notice of the children.

"What a rude chap! What did he want?" asked Rustom after the two had gone.

"You will be surprised. He wanted to know if my mother was interested in selling off a part of the land. Just a small portion. Mummy refused, of course," answered Dipak.

"What, another buyer for Aunty’s bit of heaven? It seems to be in great demand!" grinned Ajay.

"That makes two who want to buy your place. And look, here comes another!" laughed Rustom, pointing towards the gate. The children spun around to see who came. A familiar figure was walking up the path.

"Oh no, not again. Das Uncle was here only this morning. Why does he visit day and night? Does he not have anything to do?" muttered Dipak. Richa was surprised to hear the dismay in his voice.

"He is your nearest neighbour after all. No need to wonder if he walks up every now and then to meet you. Must be leading a pretty lonely existence," Ajay tried to explain.

Dipak continued to frown.

"All the same, I wish he was not here so often. I find it most suspicious..." he grumbled.

Mr. Das did not just visit, he over Stayed, according to Dipak, because he lingered on till well after dinner and went only after it was late night.
Richa lay in bed. It was morning, the house was waking up. She lay there listening to the early morning sounds of the household. "Grr.. bow-wow!" she heard Moti growl.

Someone stirred in the next bedroom. "Yes, yes, I know, you want to go out. Come!" It was Mrs. Pant. The door clattered open. With a flurry of light footsteps the dog rushed out. Richa yawned and dug back lazily into the quilt.

"Tap! Tap!" startled, Richa opened her eyes wide. Somebody had tapped on the windowpane. Who could it be?

A strange face peered at her through the window. It was a small red face with round black eyes and a row of white teeth. The mouth stretched into a grin and Richa broke into laughter. It was a monkey! "Go away. What are you doing here?" she cried.

The monkey made faces, and tapped again. Scared that it may break the glass, Richa threw a pillow at the window. The face vanished at once. Again she snuggled back into the quilt. It was holidays after all. The rest of the household, however, could not afford the luxury of a late morning.

Ahmed was already up and about. She could hear his voice downstairs. "Time for Chhote Nawab to
wake up... Oh no, the bath water is not hot yet! What to do? Is this a place for anyone to live? I cannot imagine why Begum Sahiba sent us all the way up here!" he grumbled to no one in particular.

"Moti, drink your milk!" Richa heard Hari Singh's voice next. "Where is this wretched dog? Why must I run after him to give his feed, the spoilt creature!"

'Moti is out adventuring in the woods, no doubt. Or chasing rabbits in the meadows, surely!' thought Richa with a smile. By the time she went downstairs, Rustom and Dipak were already sitting down for their breakfast. Ajay arrived much later, hair uncombed, shirt hanging out, face wet from his bath.

"Here comes our friend. Neat and clean as ever!" mocked Rustom.

"Sorry, I overslept," mumbled Ajay defensively

"It is all right," smiled Mrs. Pant. "Enjoy your holidays. What do you plan to do today?"

"No plans, I just want to laze," drawled Rustom.

"There is a beautiful waterfall nearby, worth a visit," suggested Mrs. Pant. "How about going there?"

"Sounds great!" said Richa. Her eyes fell on the monkey that had just walked in through the open door. The naughty creature ignored the amused stares and calmly headed for the milk that waited for Moti in the corner. Dipak tried to shoo him away but Mrs. Pant held him back. "Ssh. Let him drink. Poor fellow, must be hungry. We will get more milk for the dog," she whispered.

The monkey picked the bowl high up in both hands. He drank with loud slurps, smacking his lips between each long slurp. The milk was soon gone. Setting the bowl down with a clatter the satisfied simian leapt
towards the open window without even a backward glance at the children watching with such interest.

"Hey, hey, how about thanking us, you rude chap?" shouted Rustom. But the brown head vanished out of sight. "I certainly would not like to have him as my guest," laughed Rustom.

The children set off for the picnic spot soon after breakfast. The waterfall was quite some distance away. Richa could hear the roar of the falling water as they turned the bend. The broad stream of water cascaded down a twenty feet high wall of rocks and boulders. It splashed and hissed, sending showers flying in all directions. The fall presented a majestic sight. The tall ferns and the dense greenery that surrounded the falling waters lent the area an air of mysterious grandeur. Breathless and awestruck, they gazed in wonder at Nature's handiwork.

Surprisingly, the stream turned serene once it had gushed down the steep height. It flowed on, with just a few tiny ripples to break its smooth surface. The children wandered down the bank, curious to see where the stream went. Ajay, who had walked ahead, soon returned. "I saw a lot of logs down there. What does it mean?" he asked.

The others ran to see. The water was chock-full of huge logs of different sizes and thicknesses. "The logs are being floated downstream," explained Dipak.

"Where do they come from? Are they allowed to cut trees in these forests?" asked Ajay.

"Oh, no! They still get felled. It is very difficult to prevent it because this place is so cut off and remote. It is easy to steal," explained Dipak with a shrug of his shoulders.
"You mean nobody knows about it? Nor complains?" Rustom was surprised.
"Mummy gets very agitated to see the tree stumps. She has reported the matter several times. Well, who cares?" Dipak shrugged again. Richa remembered the noises she had heard at night and wondered. Was it someone axing trees in the dead of the night?
"Who chops them off?" asked Rustom indignantly.
"No idea. The felling of trees goes off and on, sometimes in one area, then in another, but no one is caught. I told you, nothing happens. The villagers keep their mouths shut. Very likely they know who the thief is. However, they are either too scared to tell, or are given small bribes to keep their mouths sealed," explained Dipak.

Ajay had been examining the sandy bank. "Look, the logs have been dragged along the sand. Let us follow these tracks to find out where they have been dragged down from."
There was a little clearing deep inside the forest. Bushes and branches of the trailing ivy that covered the ground looked crushed and trampled upon. "They probably dumped the trees here. Maybe the chopping of branches and leaves was carried out here. Those twigs and branches lying here give the game away," Ajay played the perfect sleuth.
"Who did it? Don't they know it is wrong to cut trees?" Richa was quite agitated.
"This is nothing. Wait till you see some other areas. They are quite bare. It is greener here because Mummy creates a real scene if she catches anyone cutting trees. They are really scared of her down here!" Dipak informed them proudly.
"We must tell her about our discovery. She will know what to do," decided Richa. "Let us go back."

Something else awaited the sleuths when they reached home. Ahmed met the four at the gate. "Chhote Nawab, I don't want to stay here. There is something wrong with this place. It is not safe for you. Let us return home at once," he said in a panic-stricken voice.

"Why?" laughed Rustom. "What happened?"

Ahmed spat in disgust. "This home is covered with the evil eye. A dead monkey was found in the garden. Ask Shibu, if you do not believe me."

Shibu entered the next moment. "He is right. I can recognize the dead monkey. I have chased it away several times. It had got used to stealing from the kitchen. It even came into the dining room today/' he said.

"You mean, it is the monkey which drank Moti's milk this morning?" asked Ajay.

"The same. And I think the milk was poisoned. Soon after I chased it out of the house the monkey foamed at the mouth and fell unconscious. I tried to help, because I had grown fond of the naughty creature. But it was no use," Shibu's voice was grim and his eyes dark with misery.

"Good, Moti did not touch the milk," said Hari Singh from the kitchen. "It was certainly poisoned."

Richa felt faint with shock and nausea. Had someone tried to kill the dog? Did an enemy lurk somewhere close? So dangerously close that he could sneak into the house any time and do the heinous crime so easily? It was indeed a very scary thought. It made her shudder with fear.
Dipak Takes a Walk

Dipak’s usually red cheeks turned ashen. Shaken, Rustom sat down on the sofa with a thump, while Ajay tugged frantically at his trousers in a vain attempt to make them cover his ankles.

"Are you sure?" Mrs. Pant, who had just entered, asked in a sharp voice.

Shibu nodded grimly "I saw it jump out of the dining room this morning and chased it into the garden. It collapsed soon after."

The children had to believe Shibu. It was obvious that the poison was meant for the dog. Moti barked his head off the moment danger neared, so the first step was to get rid of him. And the next step? Who would be the next victim, Richa trembled as she wondered, would it be Dipak’s mother?

As soon as a worried Mrs. Pant had left the room, Dipak burst out, "See, what did I tell you? Someone is out to harm us. What does he want? What will he do next? Whatever it is, I will not let him get away!" he shouted in a furious voice.

Rustom thumped his shoulder. "You can count on me, Dipak."

Ajay ran and joined palms with his friend. "I agree now. There is something strange going on here. We promise to catch the enemy and not rest until the ends
of justice are met. It is total war we declare, friends. Be prepared, one and all, for the greatest challenge ever faced by man," he declared.

"Who is the enemy? We do not even know whom we must fight," said Richa, puzzled.

"That is exactly what we must work out. It is now established that Dipak's suspicions are real and not just a figment of his imagination. Today's incident proves it. We must help Dipak who is in deep trouble. Do you all agree?" Ajay asked, his voice serious.

Rustom and Richa nodded gravely. Ajay continued, "Good. Now let me recount the events that took place before the incident. Yesterday we went to the caves. That evening Motilal and contractor Shivnath Chowdhari came to the house. Then Uncle Das turned up. These are the people who could have sneaked up to the corner where Moti's bowl was kept and..."

"Stop, stop! He is our man!" interrupted Rustom.

"Who?" asked Richa.

"Mr. Das! He was here till late evening. He is the only one, besides the staff, who could slip something into the bowl!" exclaimed Rustom with a triumphant air.

"You see, didn't I tell you? I always suspected the man, I know he is playing a dangerous game against my mother!" cried Dipak.

"What about the other two who were here? Could they not do it too?" questioned Richa.

"You mean Motilal and Shivnath? They were standing outside in the verandah. I don't think they went into the dining room," said Rustom.

"The milk was drunk only in the morning," argued Richa, "it did not remain there the whole night."
"No problem. Let us ask Hari Singh," suggested Dipak. He went into the kitchen where Hari Singh was arranging glasses on a tray.

The man looked guilty when questioned. "I...left the milk there all night. Moti did not drink it at night and I forgot to empty the bowl," he confessed.

"It was not a good thing to do. The milk was stale and Moti is quite fussy about food," said Dipak sternly. "Anyway it does not matter now. I am glad Moti did not touch the milk!"

"Maybe he smelt the poison. Clever old Moti! I am so glad you did not touch the dangerous stuff, you dear fellow!" Richa ran over to hug the dog, who wagged his tail as if he understood everything.

"Hello, what is happening?" asked a voice at the door. Four heads turned towards the man in the verandah, none other than Mr. Das once again.

Dipak turned his face away, not bothering to hide his feelings. Richa explained politely about the dead monkey, all the while closely watching the man's face. Not a twitch broke his cool. "A shame indeed. I must talk to your mother. She must be so worried," he said calmly. Then he walked towards the little room used by Mrs. Pant as an office.

"Oh, no, you don't!" shouted Dipak. He jumped up and blocked the way. "I know quite well who played the dirty trick! You come here a little too often, mister. What do you want?" With flashing eyes and flushed cheeks he accused Mr. Das. "I know now. You tampered with the jeep. You caused the landslide! You tried to sneak into our house, and when Moti barked, you decided to silence him, so that you could play your dirty trick in peace!"

54
The boy was really agitated. He did not seem to care what he said. His three friends tried to stop him but it was impossible to halt the rush of words. Mr. Das stared at him in surprise and wonder but did not try to stop the flow of accusations.

Richa was the only one to speak. "No, Dipak, how can you say such a thing? We are not sure. Sorry, Uncle!" she apologized on Dipak’s behalf.

"It is okay. One says all kinds of things in anger. I do not mind. May I tell you something? I was not the only person present that evening. The Lalls were in the house too. Your mother told me. She had another argument with them. And now, I must leave," said Mr. Das. He changed his mind about talking to Mrs. Pant and hurried towards the gate.

"Wait! I want to talk to you!" shouted Dipak, running after Mr. Das, who, walking fast, had already disappeared beyond the trees.

Moti wanted to follow but Dipak shouted back to the others to hold the dog. "Let him stay with Mummy. She needs to be safely guarded. I will be back soon, I must try to talk to him!" He rushed out to catch Mr. Das.

Richa held the dog’s leash tightly. Moti barked angrily and pulled at the leash. He dragged Richa out as he tried to follow Dipak. Ajay rushed to his sister’s help and managed to pull back the dog at last.

Dipak, meanwhile, was racing towards the fast vanishing Mr. Das in the distance, who hurried across the meadows towards his home, Ambar Bagh.

To Dipak’s surprise Mr. Das suddenly changed track a little further on. Towards the right, a few steps away was a grove of oaks. The man was headed
towards it. Soon he was lost to sight. Dipak waited, watching. Ah, there he was, behind a thick trunk. The man’s broad brown back could be glimpsed now and then as he made his way through the grove of trees. Intrigued, Dipak hid behind a tree and watched. Where was he headed? Why did he not walk home?

Soon Mr. Das had left the oak trees behind. He walked down a slope into the valley, then around a bend. Dipak paused once again. The figure seemed to be lost again.

The sun dipped low behind the snowy ranges. The shrill cries of the magpie, the mountain mynah, the thrush, the harsh caw-caw of the crows rose to a crescendo as they hurried to their nests. The deep, eerie silence that settled over the forest was broken by the crick-crick of the crickets. Dipak waited behind a tree-trunk. When would the man appear again?

Still there were no signs of Mr. Das. Instead Dipak heard strange rustling sounds behind him. An animal? Suddenly a hand closed around his mouth. Two strong arms caught him in a tight grip.

"Wh...who?" spluttered the boy. He kicked at the man's knees.

"Quiet!" hissed an unfamiliar voice in his ears. A handkerchief was slipped quickly over his eyes. He kicked wildly, hitting out with both hands at the person who held him.

"Stop it, I say!" The hold on his mouth and arms tightened.

"Just come quietly with us, you will not be harmed. But if you try your pranks...no one can save you!" Half pushed, half dragged, the boy was forced to follow his kidnappers.
Where is Dipak?

Slowly, shadows crept up the mountains. Srivatika was soon wrapped in a veil of darkness. Inside the house, in the boys' bedroom, the children exchanged worried glances. Every now and then Ajay ran his fingers through his hair until it stood out at all angles. Rustom lay sprawled on the bed, not the least bothered about the wrinkles gathering on his shirt.

Two long hours had dragged by. There was still no sign of Dipak.

"Come on, let us do something!" cried Richa for the umpteenth time.

"What?" said Rustom desperately. "We searched all over, shouted till we were hoarse. There was no answer. What can we do?"

"Fortunately, Aunty Pant is ensconced in her study. She probably concludes that Dipak is here. What answer shall we give when she discovers his absence?"

Ajay tugged anxiously at the sleeves of his shirt.

The door suddenly opened. "Dipak! He is back!" screamed Richa excitedly. But it was not Dipak who stood in the doorway. It was Shibu, holding a plastic bucket in hand. "M...i...i...lk!" he sang out gaily, "I have brought the evening milk!"

The three children pounced on him. "Have you seen Dipak?" they cried in unison.
"Isn’t he here?" Shibu ran to the kitchen to put the pail of milk safely on the table. "What happened to him? I thought he was with you!"

Three excited voices jabbered back. Moti’s barks and the fierce rattling of his chain told another tale. It was a while before Shibu understood what it was all about.

"Why have you tied up Moti? He would have led you straight to Dipak," he asked, shaking his head.

The three tried to explain, but Shibu did not wait to hear. "Come on, off you go!" He quickly unchained the dog, "find Dipak. Go, good boy."

The dog shot out through the door like an arrow released from the bow.

"Stop, Moti, not so fast, boy. We are coming too!" Shibu shouted as he followed the dog.

Led by Moti, the children scampered out through the gate. A big round moon hung over the mountains, spreading its radiance over the sleeping trees. It was enough to show the way.

Moti seemed to know where he was going. Nose low, ears cocked, he followed a trail. It led straight through the meadows towards the low walls of Ambar Bagh.

"He is going towards Das uncle’s home. Maybe Dipak is there safe and sound, eating a fabulous dinner!" Richa cheered up at the thought. Her hopes were dashed the very next moment. Moti swung right towards a forest of spreading oak trees. The moon’s rays could not penetrate the leafy canopy, which made the place look dark and uninviting. Nervous, Richa hung back.

Moti ran zigzag between trees. He paused several
times, especially near thicker tree-trunks. At times he circled a tree, sniffing, giving short, sharp barks, then running ahead again.

"Does he know where he is going?" asked Rustom.
"Of course he knows," said Shibu confidently. "He is a good tracker."

"I wonder what Dipak is up to," commented Ajay. "It was the most extraordinary behaviour on his part. I am shocked."

Richa was quite bewildered. Why had Dipak wandered off into the forest?

Moti bounded around in circles. He seemed very puzzled.

"What is it, Moti? Go on, find him. Good dog!" urged Shibu. The animal seemed to have turned crazy. He raced off in one direction, barking loudly, then off he ran in another direction, only to return to the same spot.

"Can't you pick up the scent?" Shibu patted the dog encouragingly.

Obviously the dog could not. He circled around, then crawled low at Shibu's feet, a picture of defeat and dejection.

"Oh, poor doggie!" Richa ran to pat his head.
"Never mind. Good dog," Shibu caressed Moti's back. "Strange, he has lost the trail."

"You mean, no more smells?" questioned Rustom in a worried voice.

"Surely he could not have vanished into thin air! There has to be an explanation," Ajay was puzzled.

"Moti has made a mistake. Dipak has gone to Das Uncle's home," said Richa hopefully.

Shibu took off his cap. He scratched his mop of
curly hair, then raised both hands to his mouth. "Dipak, where are you?" he shouted. The call echoed against the mountains. No answer came. Shibu gave a shrill whistle, which sharply pierced the silence. No response. "I just don't understand..." he said scratching his hair again.

"Let us go to Ambar Bagh," suggested Richa.

"I will bring the petromax. The clouds are about to hide the moon," said Shibu, racing back towards the farm. He was back before they had crossed the still moonlit meadows. The lantern swung in his hands. Down they walked along the narrow path they had trod on their way up just a few days ago. The high stonewalls of the neighbouring farm soon appeared. They found the gates open and walked in, a little hesitatingly. Inside, a short, narrow path bordered by a hedge led to the verandah of a small cottage. A light glimmered at its window.

"Someone is inside. Could it be Dipak and Uncle Das?" Richa crossed her fingers as hope surged anew. Her heart beat a nervous tap-tap as they climbed the steps to the verandah. Ajay stepped forward and pressed the doorbell. Richa could hear it ring inside but it evoked no reaction.

"Now what?" asked Ajay

"Let us ring again!" said Rustom loudly. He pressed the bell hard. The children waited with baited breath. Silence greeted them once again.

"This is strange," muttered Rustom. He knocked loudly, and followed it up by a thump and a kick, only to be disappointed. There was still no reply.

"Is anyone home?" Rustom gave one final kick to the door.
"Obviously no one is there."It" is the end of all hopes," muttered Ajay.
"Maybe he is sleeping. Or...or helpless," said Richa, her voice small. "Let us find out."
"How?" asked Rustom.
"By breaking in," answered the girl firmly.
"Come on, we cannot enter someone's house. It is not right," protested Rustom.
"Richa, do you realize you want us to actually steal into the house? Suppose we get caught?" asked Ajay sternly.

The girl gave her brother a push. "It is not stealing if we go in to help. Dipak or Mr. Das maybe in trouble. Go on." she urged.

The others had to agree. Shibu went around, petromax in hand, trying out the doors and windows. At last, to his excitement he found that a skylight at the back had been left open. "Come on, help me! I have found a way in but it is too high for me to climb," he rushed back to tell them. Ajay followed him to the back of the house and lent him his shoulder to climb. Shibu managed to crawl in through the skylight.

Richa and Rustom waited on the front verandah. A few seconds later, the front door was cautiously opened and Shibu struck his head out through the gap. "The house is all empty. Want to come in?" he whispered.

"Yes, Shibu, we must search properly," said Richa, stepping in. The others crept in nervously. Down the hall they tiptoed, through the dining room and then into the kitchen. Richa even dared to step into the bedroom where the lantern burnt at the
window. There was no one. Their last hope was gone.
"Now what?" whispered Rustom.
Shibu raised a finger. "Shhh. Somebody is coming," he warned. He was right. They could hear the crunch of footsteps that came closer and closer.
"Run. Let us hide!" hissed Rustom, panic stricken at the thought of being caught invading someone's house.
"Why is the door open? Who is there?" The trespassers heard Mr. Das's voice.
"Thieves, I say. The house has been burgled," drawled a voice the children had heard before.
"Careful, the burglars may still be there. They might bash you up!" warned a female voice.
Torches flashed into the room picking out the figures of the four guilty ones. Richa stood transfixed, one hand raised to shield her face from the glare. Ajay, who had half-turned to run into the next room, was caught with guilt-struck eyes.
"Surprise, surprise, the thieves are children. Shocking, eh! Is this what our good old country has come to? Even kids commit crimes now! Shame! I am shocked, stunned!" cried Pamela Lall, throwing her hands up in disgust.
"I knew they were strange kids. But never would I have guessed that they are thieves as well!" Hari Lall twisted his lips in contempt.
Richa felt her face grow hot with shame and anger. "You have kidnapped Dipak!" she burst out, pointing an accusing finger at Mr. Das. "We only came to search for him. Where is he?"
"What? Why must you look for Dipak here?" Mr. Das sounded quite amazed.
Ajay spoke up at last. "Sir, I am sorry we entered your house in your absence. Dipak left Srivatika hours ago. He followed you when you left his house. Since he did not return we presumed he would be here."

"Lies. Don't believe him," shouted Pamela Lall. "It is an excuse to fob us off. You kids came to steal. When caught you made up the silly story. Looking for Dipak indeed! Why should he come here, at this time, when all good children should be in bed?"

"I bet he is at home," mocked Hari Lall.

Mr. Das spoke more gently. "Well, all right, let us say I believe you, but I am afraid he never came here. And now, you must return. He maybe safe at home. Go, before it starts to rain." He held the door open for the children, who walked stiffly into the night.
Letters

As the little procession wound its way back through the meadows, Richa began to hope once more. She pictured Dipak in the drawing room at Srivatika happily chatting with his mother.

The lights in the house were on. The front door was open and in the verandah, Mrs. Pant paced up and down. Hari Singh stood at the gate, lantern in hand.

"Where were you?" Mrs. Pant shouted the moment the bobbing petromax swung into view. "I have been so worried... You must inform me when you leave the house... And where is Dipak?"

"We...thought he would be here, Aunty," Richa's voice was shaky.

"He is not. Where is he?" asked Mrs. Pant sharply.

The next few moments passed in confusion. Questions and answers flew back and forth. Dipak's mother quickly took charge. "Hari Singh, go immediately to the Police Station. Ahmed, take someone from the Staff Quarters and search the woods. Shibu, you may accompany the search team. Take torches and lanterns along."

Orders given, she sank onto the sofa with a deep sigh. "Your dinner is on the table, children," she pointed out. Nobody was in a mood to eat.
"Pant Aunty, are there wild animals in the jungle?" asked Richa.

"Dipak knows how to protect himself from animals. He has lived here all his life. He may not know how to tackle other beasts—the human ones," answered the lady grimly.

Richa and Rustom looked blank but Ajay understood. "Do you have anyone in mind, Aunty?" he asked.

There was a long pause. Mrs. Pant seemed to be in deep thought. At last she spoke in a grave voice, "No. I think it is time I told you...I have been receiving threatening messages...letters...for a long time. I kept it a secret from Dipak because I did not want him to worry. Just a moment!" She disappeared into her study and returned with a black wooden box in her hand. Opening the tiny lock with a key hung around her neck, she took out a bundle of papers. "I kept these hidden from Dipak. This is the first one. I received it about a year ago."

Ajay took the sheet and unfolded it. 'This is no place for a lone woman. Go back home,' he read the words out. They were scrawled across the page in large letters in Hindi.

"I took it as a prank. Besides, this was my only home. I had left my parents' house long ago, and considered my husband's home as my own. Why must I leave, I thought. So I just ignored it," Mrs. Pant went on.

"Then?" asked Richa breathlessly.

"Another letter arrived a few months later," said Dipak's mother showing them a postcard. "It had neither date nor address. The writing was the same.
as in the previous message. 'Life can be dangerous. Leave, before it is too late/ it said.'

"You stayed on. How very brave of you!" Richa's eyes shone with admiration.

"I refused to take anonymous letters seriously," explained Mrs. Pant. "There were five more letters with similar warnings. Besides, strange accidents took place. All minor, of course, but enough to worry me. For a while, I was undecided. Then I made up my mind. I would not give in to vile threats. Trusting God to help me, I decided to carry on, face challenges when they came. Fortunately, I have honest and loyal staff who can be trusted," Mrs. Pant ended her story.

"No wonder Dipak was so afraid," said Rustom, "he must have sensed the danger."

"Though I kept reassuring him, he probably guessed that there was something very wrong. Poor boy. It must have caused him such great agony," admitted Dipak's mother.

"He was indeed very troubled. We felt sympathy towards him, but did not know how to help. Can we assist in any manner, Aunty?" asked Ajay.

"I don't know. Let us wait for the search party," said Mrs. Pant with a sigh.

The party soon returned, without any news to cheer them. The men had searched everywhere, but had not found a sign of the missing boy. Shibu had taken the dog with him and roamed the favourite haunts of Dipak, all to no avail. Tired and in despair, Mrs. Pant was persuaded to retire to her room.

The children were too restless to sleep. They gathered upstairs in Richa's room so that Mrs. Pant would not be disturbed.
"Someone is trying to force her out of her home," sighed Ajay.

"Who? Why?" wondered Rustom.

"We must work it out. It calls for a lot of brainwork. Let us all put our heads together and discuss it. The adults call it a brainstorming session," said Ajay.

"First we must find Dipak," insisted Rustom.

"Of course, that remains the foremost task. Well, other questions must also be tackled. For example, who sent the letters? What is the motive? Is it because the person wants her to vacate the premises? If so, why? Finally, we must get the culprit(s) caught," Ajay decided.

"Easier said than done. I can guess who sends the letters," said Rustom.

"Go on. Let us have your theory first."

"Das Uncle. He lives close by in a small cottage. Now he wants the bigger, better farm for himself. He is close enough to carry out his dirty plans. It was him whom Dipak followed. And now he pretends ignorance. I bet you a hundred rupees he is behind it all," Rustom made his guess.

"Hmm. Dipak's suspicions have rubbed off on you. My theory is completely different. I suspect the Lalls. They came here about a year ago. They covet the place and want to acquire wealth by developing it into a modern tourist spot. Aunty refuses to oblige. Kidnapping Dipak is part of their pressure tactics," Ajay voiced his opinion.


"I mean, by kidnapping Dipak, they wish to prove
that it is not safe to stay here. They want to force Aunty to leave. Richa, what do you think?” asked Ajay.

"Umm, I am not sure. Another person who wants land is that builder—what is his name—Shivnath. Remember?” asked Richa with a thoughtful air.

"Oh, but he is not around that often. What can he do?” laughed Rustom.

Richa had no reply. She felt sure it was not that simple. There had to be some reason more important than just greed for the land and for Srivatika.
Richa on the Trail

Richa awoke even before she had really gone to sleep. It had been a troubled night for her. Thoughts filled her mind. Faces appeared, and then vanished. Only Dipak’s disturbed features refused to go away.

Soon Richa had made up her mind. It was no use lying there and worrying. She must act. She jumped out of bed and tiptoed downstairs. Opening the front door, she peeped out. Dawn had broken. She put on her jacket and slipped out quietly. Someone brushed past as she stepped onto the verandah. "Moti? Quiet! Let us not wake everyone up," she warned.

Outside it was cold though the air was fresh and invigorating. The trees sparkled clean after a rainy night. Someone caught the girl’s arm. It was Shibu. "Oh! You are awake too?" asked Richa, happily.

"Has Dipak come?" asked the boy eagerly.

"No. Listen, let us go to the oak forest. It was dark last night. Still we may discover some clues in the daylight," suggested the girl.

The sun peeped through a gap in the mountains. It made the drops of water on the broad oak leaves glisten and shine. As they walked under the trees, the breeze shook down showers of raindrops on their heads.

Moti sniffed the ground as he followed the other
The familiar smell of his beloved master Dipak was still there, though much fainter now. Nose to ground, he ran ahead, sniffing, until he reached the spot which had puzzled him last night. He went wild again. Richa examined the area while Shibu prodded and probed among the fallen leaves.

"Horse dung, quite fresh. Fallen last night. Who rode the horse?" He ran a little further and bent down again. "I was right. Look, hoof marks!" muttered Shibu, as he examined the ground.

It made Richa wonder. "Did Dipak ride off on a horse? No wonder, Moti could not pick up his scent!"

"You never know, it could be another horseman," commented Shibu.

Riding was the mode of travel in the hills, Richa knew. She had seen mules carrying loads and people on horseback quite often. "Look, a parallel set of hoof marks. Two horses have passed this way," she noted. Two rows of hoof marks, two of dung side by side meant there were perhaps two horses," decided Richa. "Let us follow them anyway. It is the only clue we have," she mumbled.

The marks were clear and deep at times. Sometimes they were not visible at all. Doggedly the two continued the search. The two horses had soon left the oak forest and taken the beaten track towards the valley. Suddenly, Shibu bent over something that shone golden through the leaves.

"Isn't this Dipak's?" He picked up a pen that Richa immediately recognized.

"Yes, it is! This is an important clue. It shows he came here. We must be sure of the timing. Did he drop it last night, or did it fall when we passed this
way on our way to the cave?” wondered Richa.

“I saw the pen in his hand last evening. He wrote a letter for me.” Shibu told her excitedly.

“Good. We can depend on this clue then!” Richa was pleased. They were on the right track, after all. Encouraged, they continued to follow the hoof marks. Down into the valley, along the dried up stream, they had come down from Srivatika taking the steep short cut. The horses had taken the longer route along the beaten track. Both led to the same valley, where Shibu’s cave was.

The trail passed the cave. There was a jumble of marks on the wet ground next to the boulder. Not just horses, human feet had trod there. Moti went into a frenzy of joy and excitement that said it all. No more proof was needed. Dipak had surely come here on a horse, then jumped down here. The dog scraped and scratched excitedly at the boulder.

"Dipak is in here. Why, I don’t know. But I am quite sure,” Shibu sounded as ecstatic as the barking dog.

"Let us push it away then. Quick!” cried Richa.

The two struggled to remove the heavy boulder while Moti jumped all over. They did not notice the presence of strangers who appeared on the scene.

"Catch the dog first,” suddenly someone shouted just behind Richa. She swung around to see, but her arms were caught in a tight grip. A hand clamped around her mouth. Shibu sprang forward to help but a second pair of arms closed around him.

Richa screamed. Her voice came out as a low, muffled cry, which was ignored by her captors. The two children were well and truly caught, with none around to offer help.
The Warning

Back at home, Ahmed knocked loudly at the door, waking Rustom up. "Chhote Nawab, let us leave this wild jungle. It is not safe...!" he cried in an agitated voice.

"What? Has Dipak come back?" Rustom shot up in bed.

Ajay poked a tousled head out of his quilt. "What is going on? Can't you let a fellow sleep in peace...? Oh, where is Dipak?"

"Allah only knows!" Ahmed raised both hands, palm upwards. "We searched, the whole night through. Not a sign of the boy. That is why I say..."

"No need to say anything. We are already worried and upset, Ahmed, don't add your voice to it. It will only make everything sound worse!" Rustom scolded the man.

At last the two boys were dressed and ready. They went out to find Mrs. Pant pacing restlessly up and down in the verandah. "Look at this," she held out a piece of paper. "It was stuck on the gate post. Hari Singh found it this morning."

Ajay read out the letter. "Now do you understand the danger? Prepare to leave, if you want your son back. If you do not leave by tomorrow—BEWARE." The note was in Hindi.
Furious, the boy rolled up the letter into a ball and threw it away in a gesture of disgust. "The filthy villains. What have they done to Dipak? What a vile, mean, wicked, foul act. And how dare they issue such a threat?" he muttered angrily.

Rustom picked up the ball again. He straightened it out and examined the writing closely. "Do you recognize the writing?" he asked Mrs. Pant.

Mrs. Pant shook her head. She folded the paper properly and went to put it safely in her black box.

"Where is lazybones, my sister? Is she still asleep? I must wake her up," said Ajay, still angry.

Rustom stopped him. "Let her laze. She will wake up when she wants to."

The police turned up shortly after. The inspector sat importantly on the drawing room sofa, a notebook in hand. He questioned all those who were present.

"Hari Singh, call Shibu. He may have something to say," said Mrs. Pant.

Hari Singh returned a little after fifteen minutes, a perplexed expression on his face. "I can't find him. He woke up early, said he could not sleep. Now he is not to be seen anywhere. I looked all over, but could not find Shibu."

At last it occurred to Ajay. Was Richa really asleep? Rushing upstairs he kicked the door open. The room was empty. At last they realized it—not only Richa and Shibu, the dog too was missing.

The inspector gave a disgusted snort. "What kind of a set-up is this, Madam? Your message said one boy was missing. I trudge all the way up the hill, leaving aside important tasks, only to learn that a whole brood of kids is missing. Is this a police case?
Or a prank played by irresponsible children? Give them a good spanking on my behalf. And now, allow me to leave. What a waste of precious time!"

He walked off in a huff, refusing the tea offered by Hari Singh.

Mrs. Pant, Ajay and Rustom were left staring at the policeman’s receding back. Instead of helping them to find the missing children he had lost his temper and walked off. How unfair! Now they were on their own. What were they to do?

Before they could decide the next step, however, more visitors appeared. First came Mr. Das, followed by the Lalls. "Hope your boy is safe and sound at home. The children came searching for him to my house. Ha, ha! What strange ideas kids come up with!" laughed Mr. Das, as if everything was a big joke.

Mrs. Pant did not reply. She turned towards Pamela Lall, the lady with the red hair. "Where is my son?" she demanded angrily.

"Why ask me? Am I supposed to keep track of all errant kids?" asked Pamela tartly.

"You mean... Are you accusing us of hiding your son?" Hari Lall was indignant.

"Indeed I am," Mrs. Pant’s voice was cold.

"Control yourself, Madam," protested Mr. Das, "we understand your pain, if the boy is really missing. Why must you accuse them?"

Dipak’s mother stalked off and returned with the letter in her hand. "Because of this. Read and tell me, who sent it?" She handed the paper to Hari Lall.

"It is in Hindi. I can't read it," said Hari Lall passing it on to his wife.
"Neither can I," Pamela handed the letter to Mr. Das, who scrutinized it for a while before reading the letter.

"Very threatening, indeed," he said, handing the paper back to Mrs. Pant. "This does not prove that the Lalls are the kidnappers. What makes you think they are?"

Pamela stamped her high heels on the floor and shook a finger at Dipak's mother. "How dare you? H...how dare you accuse us?" she spluttered with rage. "We will sue you for this."

"You noticed neither of us could read Hindi? What makes you think it was our handiwork?" Hari Lall attempted to be more polite.

"I don't care if you know the language or not. But surely, you want my house and land. Since I refuse, you choose to threaten me," Mrs. Pant shot back.

Hari Lall lost his temper once again. "Of all the preposterous statements, this takes the cake. What does she think I am? A petty criminal? Come, Pamela darling, not a minute-more can we stay here!"

The two strode out angrily. Mr. Das lingered for a while, then took his leave. Mrs. Pant collapsed on the sofa. "Good riddance," she muttered.

"They had a point, Aunty," said Rustom. "If they cannot read Hindi, how can they write those letters?"

"Don't believe Hari Lall. He is one of those who pretend they don't know their own language. He belongs to this village. Went off to America only after he had left college. Of course, he knows Hindi and very well too," she explained.

"We had better begin another search," Ajay reminded everybody.
"Let us hurry! It is very scary. Where could they be?" said Rustom.

"First Dipak, and now Shibu and Richa. Not to forget Moti. Things are getting murkier and murkier. Come on, let us go," Ajay caught Rustom's hand and pulled him towards the gate. As he closed the gate after them they heard Ahmed shout, "Don't you step out, Chhote Nawab, three have already vanished, you too will disappear. What will I tell Begum Sahiba?" He rushed close and gripped Rustom's arm.

"You come along too. You too can help us search. Please, Ahmed, we really need you," Rustom very cleverly cajoled.

Ahmed melted. "All right, master. Let me bring my bag." He was soon back, his bag clutched tightly in hand. "I am ready. Let us go," he said, carefully adjusting his turban at just the right angle.
The Two Horsemen

Every moment Ajay expected his sister to spring out from somewhere. The hope remained a dream. He kept his ears cocked for Moti’s barks, Shibu’s shouts and whistles, but except for the rustling of the wind and the chattering of birds he heard nothing.

"Its no use. The jungle has swallowed them up. Chhote Nawab, this is no place for you," Ahmed’s grumbles and warnings irritated Ajay, but he remained patient.

"Let us follow this track," suggested Rustom, "it will be easier to walk." They took the path that led them through the oak forest. It went around the mountains and then gently sloped down into a valley. A dried up stream ran through the middle of the narrow valley.

"We are on familiar territory. Is this not the way to Shibu’s cave?" asked Ajay.

"It is, Shibu had brought us down a short cut straight from Srivatika. This is the longer way,’but certainly much more easy to walk down," laughed Rustom. They passed the mouth of the cave. The boulder was in place, they noticed. As they wandered on they heard the trot of horses.

The next moment a big brown horse trotted up towards the two boys. Behind it walked a smaller
horse. The boys stepped hastily aside to let the animals pass. Ajay recognized both the riders. The shorter man was Gopi, the gardener at Srivatika. The tall rider was Shivnath, whom they had met before. It had not been a pleasant experience, for the man had been unnecessarily rude. Ajay looked the other way, pretending not to notice him. But the man was in a friendly mood.

"Are you not the children visiting Srivatika?" the contractor Shivnath pulled back the horse's reins and looked down at the boys.

Ajay nodded, lips set in a firm line, one hand pulling at the trouser leg.

"I heard a boy is lost," probed the man.
"Dipak! Did you see him?" asked Rustom eagerly.
"No, no. Not at all. His mother must be in a state of great shock. Poor lady," said Shivnath.
"She is. Now Shibu and Richa are missing too." Rustom had no problem being friendly with the man.
"Tcha, tcha! No place for a lonely woman. She must go and live in the city. Why does she stick on here?" asked the man.

"What is it to you?" retorted Rustom, kicking a stone that lay on the path.
"Nothing. Must go now," Shivnath slapped his horse and then set off at a fast pace.
"Did you hear? Why did he say that?" asked Ajay the moment they were alone.
"What?" Rustom was puzzled at Ajay's excitement.
"'It is no place for a woman'. The words are familiar. The anonymous letters harp on the same point," said Ajay animatedly.
"I don't suppose it means any thing...she does live
all alone... and her son is lost... so come on, let us find the lost son!" Rustom laughed away Ajay’s suspicions.

Ahmed was gazing at the receding backs of the two horsemen.

"Chhote Nawab, where had Gopi gone? Did you see the big axe he carried? Strange lad... vanishes at night, lazes all day. I caught him napping in the garden, when he should have been digging. You must tell Madam. This gardener is no good. She must get rid of him," complained Ahmed.

"Ahmed, stop spying on Aunty Pant’s staff. It is not a nice thing to do," Rustom scolded him.

"No, sir, I don’t want to carry tales. Everyone talks about Gopi and his strange doings," said Ahmed, but his complaints were ignored by the boys.

The party of rescuers stopped every now and then to call out for the missing children. Only echoes answered their calls. They walked on. The path ran parallel to the empty stream, then turned left and climbed up a hill. It was a steep climb this time, and as they went higher and higher Rustom began to feel dizzy. He sat down to rest.

"Don’t look down, Rustom. Remember what Dipak advised?" Ajay told his friend.

"Let us return now. We have come too far from the house. We will get lost," complained Rustom.

"Come on, do get up. How can we give up our search? And there is no question of getting lost. All we need to do is to follow the path and go back the way we came. Seems to me people come here quite often. The path is well-trodden," said Ajay.

"You are tiring him out, sir. Look at his face, look at his clothes." Ahmed ran to the boy and
fanned his flushed face with the end of his turban. It was enough to make Rustom jump up. "I am all right. Don't fuss, Ahmed. Let us go."

Fortunately for the two boys, the path now led downhill. They were astonished to find themselves looking down into another, wider valley. The roar of water falling and striking rocks came as a pleasant surprise. "The waterfall!" they cried excitedly.

Down raced Ajay and Rustom. There was the splendid sight again. The twenty feet tall sheets of water rushed down the precipice, striking the wet rocks, hissing and splattering, spraying drops into the air. The vegetation around was a jumble of shining green of all shades and hues.

"Time out!" cried Rustom. He threw himself on a large flat rock. The two boys stretched out side by side, and closed their eyes. The long walk up the hill had left them exhausted.

"What have you got in your bag?" Rustom asked, feeling hungry. The apples and the biscuits brought back their energy.

"Come on, how can we rest when Dipak and Richa are lost? Let us start again," said Ajay, jumping up. They were off again. They raced along the banks of the stream until they reached the spot they had seen earlier with Dipak. A few logs still floated in the waters of the stream. The sand around was disturbed, with fresh twigs and leaves scattered where logs had been dragged to the stream.

"Look, someone is still doing it. I mean, chopping up trees and sending them floating down the stream. Why doesn't anyone stop it?" asked Ajay.

"We should have told Aunty Pant last time. Maybe
she could have done something. Let us see what is happening there!” Rustom ran towards the clearing that they had visited last time with Dipak. There were more logs here, some in a neat pile, others lying around in a haphazard way.

"This is rather unfortunate..." began Ajay.

Rustom was not listening. One hand raised, he tried to silence Ajay, "Shhh... Listen. Barks. Can you also hear, Ajay?"

Ajay nodded, eyes lighting up.
"Could it be...Moti?"

"It is possible!" Ajay had perked up. The two were off in a flash, trying to locate the barks. The sounds were sometimes near, sometimes far. The barks ended in a peculiar growl that made Rustom smile. "Yes!"

"But where?"

They cocked their ears and listened carefully. "Near that fir tree. Over there. Behind that bush with the blue flowers," Ajay pointed out.

The two boys raced to the spot, which was on a slope facing the clearing. "The barks are coming from behind the bush. Why can't we see him?" asked a puzzled Rustom.

They soon knew the reason. Rustom pushed aside the thick branches of the flowering hydrangea and stared in amazement. Before them was a door. Rough, made of thick wooden planks, it was set in the rocky mountain wall. It had a big lock hanging in the centre.

The barking was very loud, and no wonder, because the dog was right before them. Only he was on the other side of the door.

"Moti!" the two boys yelled together.

"Woof! Woof! Woof!" came the answer.
Meanwhile, inside the cave where Richa had been dumped by her captors, it was dark. The girl sighed and changed position. Her hands were tied behind her back. The legs were bound too. Next to her Shibu twisted and kicked, refusing to lie quietly. He thought he could free himself. She knew it was impossible, but she could not tell him so. For their mouths had been tied up too.

Moti barked his head off! His chain rattled loudly as he ran to and fro angrily, trying to escape.

All the three prisoners were nicely trussed up and bound.

How did it happen?

Scenes flashed past in Richa’s mind—two masked men gripping her arms, the struggle, Moti’s snarls and growls, Shibu’s beautiful cave where she found Dipak lying bound and helpless, the long walk through dark tunnels, and finally the entry into the cave where they now lay. She had just had a glimpse of Dipak, as the men dragged her through the outer cave. The men had taken her and Shibu there first. She had been relieved to see Dipak. Then they brought the three—Moti, Shibu and Richa—all the way through dark passages—deep in the heart of the mountain, to this place. Why, she did not know.
Poor Dipak. He was alone. At least Moti and Shibu were with her, even if they could not talk.

Richa sighed and changed position again. As her eyes got accustomed to darkness, she started looking around. The walls here were ordinary, dull brown in colour.

The furniture was lined up against the opposite wall. A table, three stools, an earthen pot for water, glasses and plates—the place looked used. Files and registers were there on the table. Was it an office? An office in a cave—the idea amused the girl. What was that? She screwed her eyes, trying to pierce the darkness. Wood. A pile of slim logs stacked neatly along the wall. Was the cave a storing place for the wood?

It probably was. Richa noticed the rough wooden door set in the wall. The masked men used the cave as an office-cum store, she guessed.

Who were the men? She had not recognized them as their faces were covered. They had gone about their job quietly, hardly speaking, mouths covered, so she had not recognized them. Still they seemed vaguely familiar. The tall man had a known smell around him, and the shorter one? She closed her eyes, trying to jostle her memory. A moonlit night, a shape that dashed across the lawn. Before that, a figure that had limped around in the tomato beds. The two were the same. So was the person who had gripped her arm just outside Shibu's cave and dragged her all the way to this cave. Who was it? She shook her head, she just could not place the person, nor give him a name.

Restless, Shibu would not stay still. He continued
to kick and twist, as if that could help. And then Richa’s eyes widened. She bent forward to see. Yes, she was right. She could see that the rope around his ankles had come loose. She watched, fascinated. Would he be able to free his legs?

Shibu twisted both legs and pulled at the rope. The next moment he leapt jubilantly to his feet. He had made it! He had been able to free himself at last! With a wild jump of joy he ran to the corner and kicked something out to the center of the cave. Richa’s eyes widened with delight when she saw what it was. Trust Shibu to search it. He must have done so while he lay there kicking and squirming. "Ggh, guggle-guggle!" He tried to tell her something. He kicked the object closer to her.

Now Richa could see what it was. The object Shibu had pushed towards her was a small hatchet, used perhaps to hack the wood into smaller pieces. It was careless of the two villains to have left it there and certainly very clever of Shibu to find it. Richa plonked down to the ground, back towards Shibu. While he held the hatchet firmly between his feet, she rubbed the string tying her wrists together against its blade.

The trick worked! The strings gave way and her hands were free! Her first act was to pull down the scarves that tied their mouths. Then she cut the knot on the boy’s wrists. With loud whoops of joy he danced around the cave. Richa cut the string that bound her legs. Now she too could whirl and dance with Shibu.

"Woof! Woof!" Moti’s barks were excited. She ran to hug him. "Go on, continue to bark. Someone may hear you," she told him. She did not know that the
barks had already been heard. Outside the cave, Ajay and Rustom had their ears glued to the sounds.

"Woof! Woof!" barked the dog. Inside the cave, Richa and Shibu were startled when they heard the shout that came in reply to the dog’s barks.

"Moti!" It sounded like Ajay’s voice. Richa and Shibu could not believe they had heard it right. They jumped in joy.

"Did you hear?" shrieked Richa. "The boys! Ajay and Rustom!"

"Yes! Are you there?" The two wild, incredulous screams from the other side of the door answered Richa’s shouts.

"Yes. It is us! Richa! Shibu!" cried the two prisoners at the top of their voices. Shouts and barks filled the cave.

"Open the door! Quick!" Richa was impatient now.

"We can’t. There is a big lock on the door!" answered Ajay from the other side.

"Well, break it then!" shouted the girl.

Thumps, cracks, slam! Richa heard the boys bang away at the door. However, the stout lock resisted all attempts to break it open. Meanwhile, the thought struck her. They had forgotten about Dipak! He needed to be rescued too. "How far are you from Shibu’s cave?" she shouted through the door.

"Far!" shouted Rustom from the other side.

"Listen, Dipak is prisoner there. Rescue him first!" Richa shouted.

"But what about you two?" asked Ajay, his voice sounding worried.

"Go on, Shibu and I will manage. We have Moti with us. Hurry. He has been there the whole night,"
Richa ordered. There was silence for sometime as the boys on the other side debated what they should do. To her relief, Richa soon heard the footsteps race away.

"What about us?" asked Shibu. "We must try to escape too!"

"Of course! We will go back the way we came, through the tunnels. Now that we have broken free, there is nothing to stop us!" Richa remained confident.

Shibu's eyes widened in fear. "Back into the tunnels? It was too dark. We may get lost. There were too many twists and turns."

"Moti will guide us. Can't you? Good dog, take us to Dipak!"

"There are no Dipak smells to be picked up," protested Shibu, but Richa assured him it could be done. "Back! Back, the way we came," she told the dog who wagged his tail. He seemed to understand. "Back, home, Moti, home!" Richa added.

Without any hesitation Moti shot off into the darkness. Shibu ran to catch the leash. He managed to do it before the dog disappeared into the tunnel. As they entered the black corridor, the darkness closed around her. Richa gasped in shock. As they went in further, she began to feel suffocated. Her heart beat a loud tattoo inside her chest.

Soon, however, the tunnel became wider and a dim light shone down on them from some hole overhead.

The tunnel took a twist and slipped into darkness again. Nervous, not a bit scared, Richa clung to Shibu's arm. More twists, some leading to dimly-lit caves,
others into pitch darkness, more long passages, until at last they noticed some light ahead.

The tunnel had broadened again. A little later they stepped into a more lighted area—Shibu’s cave! It was the place where Dipak was held prisoner!

It was almost daylight in the cave. Richa and Shibu were greeted with shouts of delight. Richa rubbed her eyes in the glare of the brighter lights in the cave and saw her brother standing and grinning at her. Ajay had already reached the cave!

"Hey, you arrived before us!" shouted Richa. Behind her brother was Rustom. The two had raced, at double speed, all the way up the hill, along the stream and its bank, and back towards the wondrous cave. Ahmed, panting and gasping, had trailed the two boys. With Ahmed’s help they had succeeded in pushing the boulder aside. In fact, the three had just entered the cave.

"Where is Dipak?" Richa turned to the boy who still lay on the floor. Relieved to see him there she rushed excitedly towards her brother. "I told Shibu we would be able to make our way through the tunnel route! It was so dark and frightening. But Moti led us through the maze of tunnels. We came that way and you arrived from outside. What fun! We both reached at the same time!" She flung her arms around her brother and hugged him, much to Ajay’s embarrassment.
Fire!

In the midst of the noise and the happy talk Dipak remained silent. He could not help it for his mouth was gagged, his feet and hands tied up with scarves. "Poor Dipak! He was caught and thrown inside the cave," said Richa.

"No wonder we could not find him!"
"Who did it? Was it Mr. Das?" asked Rustom.
"The same man who caught us, I am sure..." began Richa when Dipak made a muffled sound to attract attention. Everyone rushed to his side.

"Hey, let us get him out of this first. Come on, Ahmed, do something," said Rustom.

Ajay bent to remove the gagging from Dipak's mouth. He untied the scarf that covered his lips.

"Hurry!" cried Dipak the moment he could speak. "There may not be much time!" He tugged frantically at the string around his feet while the others fumbled with the knots.

"Here is some milk," offered Ahmed.
"Water. I feel thirsty." Dipak grabbed the glass and emptied it in one second.

"Have the peanuts," Ahmed held out a packet. Dipak ignored the eats. Instead he staggered towards the opening. "Not a moment to lose. Hurry, before it is too late."
"No doubt Aunty Pant is waiting most anxiously," said Ajay.

"What is the hurry?" asked Rustom. "Why are you so impatient?"

"They plan to set our house on fire! Yes, they are desperate! I heard them talk about it. He gave them instructions to burn our house," Dipak interrupted, shrieking in desperation.

"What? Set the house on fire?" shouted Richa.

"Let us hasten then! What are we standing around for?" Ajay raced to the mouth of the cave.

"Hurry, let us rush immediately!" shouted Rustom pushing everyone out of the cave.

Led by Moti and Shibu they bounded up the slope that was a short cut to their house on the hill. Though it was not too far, the climb was steep making the city children, not used to walking uphill, pant and stop every now and then to catch their breath. It was a full twenty minutes before they reached close to Dipak's house. Richa saw the spiral of grey smoke even before she reached the crest of the hill. The smoke curled up towards the grey clouds that were gathering in the sky.

"Too late! Oh no, it is all over! All over! Where is Mummy?" moaned Dipak.

Richa gasped at the sight of the house on fire. Somehow she had not really believed that it could happen. Such things could only be seen in movies and now it was actually unfolding before her shocked eyes. But she had to comfort Dipak for whom the loss would be indeed great. "Everything will be all right, Dipak. I am sure your mother is okay. Do not worry," she tried to reassure him though her heart was
beating in panic. Somehow she scrambled up the rest of the slope. Now she could see the house. Orange flames were licking at the white-washed walls. Shiny little sparks crackled and flew upwards to mingle with the grey smoke.

Dipak had already reached the house while the others still struggled to climb. At last Richa topped the crest and raced towards the house. She found that there were no firemen to douse the fire. Instead, figures rushed around carrying buckets of water. Someone had connected the garden hose to the pipe from the overhead tank. A jet of water gushed out of the hosepipe to hit the flames on the walls. It looked too weak to quench the raging flames, thought the girl. She closed her eyes expecting the fire to bring down the house any moment. Only God and luck could save it, she knew, and folded her hands in prayer.

A drop of water fell on her hands. Richa looked up in surprise. The clouds that had been gathering in the sky since morning were opening up. Rain pattered down in fat drops. A few moments later, the shower turned into thick sheets of water. The fiery flames were subdued, the thick smoke washed down by Nature’s mercy.

Richa opened her eyes to find that the flames no longer leapt against the house. Instead she saw the black marks on walls, the burnt wooden frames of windows and the blackened beams. Though damaged badly, the house still stood proud against the dark sky. She felt relieved. "Did I not tell you, Dipak, that everything would be okay?" Getting no reply, she looked around. Where was he?
The boy had rushed into the house. "Mummy, where are you? Are you all right?"

Mrs. Pant could not be found. Dipak ran headlong into the house, shouting frantically for his mother. Ajay and the others were still out in the garden, running around with buckets in their hands. Moti barked furiously, at anyone and everyone and kept getting into people's way. Richa rushed to place a comforting hand on his neck. "Hush, Moti, stay still. Everything will be okay soon. Don't get so excited. It is all right," she said soothingly. The dog quietened under her gentle hand though she could feel him tremble. Poor Moti!

Richa looked at the walls, still smouldering and hot, though the flames had died out. She walked slowly towards the verandah, wondering whether it was safe to climb up. She had to find out. Was Dipak's mother inside when the house was set aflame? If so, had she been able to escape? "Where is Aunty Pant? Dipak, did you find your mother?" she shouted and hurried up the steps.

"Madam Pant is fine. She is safe and well!" said a voice. Mr. Das stepped out from a room into the verandah. His hair was a real mess, his shirt dusty and blackened and his face streaked and dirty. He straightened his spectacles and set them firmly on his nose. Everyone stared at him in surprise wondering what he had been up to. With a tired sigh Mr. Das sank down on the cane chair in the verandah. "She was inside, trying to collect old letters and photos. I pulled out both mother and son, lest the wooden beams fell on them," he explained to everyone's surprise.
Dipak came out just then. He clutched a big photograph of his father in Army uniform. Behind him was Mrs. Pant. Her clothes were scorched and burnt and there were black marks on her face and cheeks. Her hair, coiled usually into a neat bun, was dishevelled. She had a cheerful smile on her lips. "Thanks for rescuing us, Mr. Das! You can all join us, children. I am glad everything is all right. There is no danger now."

Richa, Rustom and Ajay rushed to join the others. They gathered under an apple tree not far from the house. Ahmed ran in and carried out a few chairs from the verandah. It was still raining, but the thick foliage kept them sheltered. Mrs. Pant gestured to all to sit down. She put a weary hand to her forehead. Mr. Das handed her a glass of water. "Sit down Madam. Yes, everything is fine now, at least as good as it can be, under the circumstances. The threat held out in the letter was actually carried out, however, luck favoured us and all is well. You are safe, and the house still stands," he said with a smile.

"Thank you. I am glad you chanced to be around. It was a good idea to turn the pipe on as you did," said Mrs. Pant.

"It was not chance. I was very worried about you, especially after I read the letter that you showed me that day. Also, as your son was missing, I came over to see if I could help. Imagine my horror when I found that the house was on fire," explained Mr. Das.

"You are so kind. As usual. You are always such a great help to us, Mr. Das! I shudder to think, if you had not been around..." murmured Mrs. Pant shaking her head with a look of helplessness.
Dipak gave an apologetic smile. "I am sorry I was so rude to you, Uncle! I did not know you came to help. I thought..." he stopped, confused, but the others knew what he meant. Obviously his suspicions were unfounded.

"I know quite well who the villain is. I recognize him..." continued Dipak when Ajay interrupted excitedly, "\ know who it is!"

"So do I!" cried Richa and Rustom together.

"You all seem to know, though it is still a mystery to me. But wait, don't tell me. Let me guess," smiled Mrs. Pant, "it is Hari and Pamela Lall, isn't it? They tried to burn down the house to force me to leave, because..."

The children burst into laughter. "You don't know a thing, Mummy," laughed Dipak hugging his mother. "Let me tell you who threw me into Shibu's cave." His voice turned grave as he told his story. He had been hiding behind a tree, waiting to follow Mr. Das, when somebody had pounced on him from behind. He was gagged, his hands were tied, and he was carried to the cave on horseback.

The two men had discussed their plans on the way. He knew both quite well. One was Shivnath, and the other, to his surprise, was Gopi, the gardener who worked at Srivatika.

"And what could be their motive? To grab Srivatika?" asked Ajay.

"Certainly not. My guess is that they want those beautiful rocks that Shibu discovered in the caves," said Dipak.

"Rocks?" asked Mrs. Pant, puzzled.

"You don't know, Mummy, Shibu discovered a cave
with the loveliest coloured rocks ever seen! With his permission I will take you there some day. It is a secret cave and only he knew about it," Dipak explained. "Till it was found by those villains."

"It has an unusual rock which should be examined by geologists," Ajay added. "Shivnath must have seen it and understood its value. He wanted to sell the stone as building material, I guess. It is more beautiful than marble, granite or any other decorative stone."

"Oh no! That means blasting the mountains. It should never be allowed! Never!" Mrs. Pant stood up, alarmed at the very thought of anyone destroying her beloved mountains just to reach some rocks, however pretty or valuable they may be.

"You need not allow it. It is up to you, for the cave is a part of your land," informed Rustom.

"Then let it remain a secret forever, as Shibu wanted," said Mrs. Pant firmly.

"And you know who was his accomplice? Gopi! He worked here, so it was easy for him to carry out the mischievous plans. He was the one who stuck the letters to the gatepost from time to time! It was he who poisoned Moti’s milk. All the other mysterious tasks were his job. He worked here and so could do it easily," said Dipak.

Suddenly Richa, who had been holding back something for a while burst out with her own ideas, "You are all wrong about the motive. It is not because of the rocks. Nor was it because of the greed and desire to grab Srivatika. The reason is quite different."

"You mean there was some other motive? What?" asked Rustom, surprised.

"You should see the cave where Shibu and I were
imprisoned," began Richa. She related her story to which they all listened in great amazement. "The cave is a store for stocking wood. Shivrath also uses it to keep odds and ends, like files and stuff, besides the wooden logs. He is the tree thief—the one who chops down the precious trees!"

Mr. Das sat up, eyes alive with interest. "Go on," he said tersely. "What else did you see? How do you know it was Shivrath's store and office?"

"Who else, Uncle? I saw the cigarette stubs. What an untidy man he is! Throws them around everywhere. Remember, we saw the stubs in the cave, when we went there the second time. We wondered who had visited the secret cave? Besides, he is the one who threw us into the cave! I recognized the smell of cigarette on him when Shibu and I were dragged down the dark tunnels to the other cave. He thought none would find us! He did not know we were clever enough to escape and tell everyone about his office in the cave forest! It is probably his secret headquarters! It's the place where he keeps his accounts..." Richa related her experiences in an excited voice.

"Now I understand!" said Ajay at last, "I see the links now. Remember the logs on the stream? The trees are chopped, collected in the clearing we saw and stored in the cave, then floated downstream. It is all managed from the secret office in the cave! By Shivrath!"

"Assisted by his friend Gopi, of course! He does the cutting and chopping, being a gardener! But, a gardener should be fond of trees, and look after them, instead of helping to cut them down!" muttered Rustom angrily.
"And you know who is the other person who helped? Motilal! The sounds I heard down in the village were those of trucks being loaded. Both he and his wife refused to admit it!" said Richa indignantly.

Dipak's mother was speechless as she listened, astounded, to the unfolding of the mystery. "Children, children, enough! It is more than I can handle. You seem to know much more than I could even imagine! But now, thanks to you, I am beginning to understand. It is no wonder they did not want me around. I did not allow anyone to hack down trees. I kept reporting to the Police, scolding anyone I saw. They, rather he, that is, friend Shivnath, knew I would not allow him to operate here."

"Right. You were enemy number one. He kept the mouths of the villagers shut, but he knew he could never silence you," said Dipak. He hugged his mother proudly.

"He suddenly discovered Shibu's cave. Must have wandered in through the tunnels that led from his store-cum-office. He understood that the stone was extremely valuable. But it was on your land, Aunty. All the more reason to get rid of you," said Ajay.

"How shocking! You mean he wanted the rocks too!" exclaimed Mrs. Pant angrily. "First trees, then the mountains itself? Is there no end to man's greed?"

It had stopped raining by now. They all walked back to the house to see what needed to be done. Though it was still hot, the smoke and the fire was gone. They carried their chairs up and set them in the verandah.

"Cool drinks for everyone?" asked Ahmed, who
went in to see if anything could be found. Meanwhile, somebody could be seen walking up to the house. As the visitors reached closer, those on the verandah recognized them. It was the Lall couple.

Pamela Lall removed her dark glasses and blinked at Dipak in surprise. "Hey boy, you are back, eh? We are so glad to see you. Your friends said you had disappeared. We dropped in to say we are sorry we were rude the other day. Your mother was already upset because you had gone missing. Ha..a...rry and I had no business losing our temper. Hey...what happened to the house? Did it catch fire?"

Everything was explained to the newcomers.

"Clever children, aren't they?" said Hari Lall, after listening to the long story. "Indians have the best brains in the world, I always tell Pamela. In fact, everything here is the best. That is why we returned. Look at all the beauty spread around us, look at the mountains, the trees, the people! Everything is just super here!" He waved an arm to include the snow-covered ranges, the stately oaks, the gracious pines, and the green meadows.

"You won't spoil it by building the fabulous resort, Uncle?" Ajay ventured to ask shyly, pulling his trouser down to cover his ankles.

"No, my dear, no, not at all! Mrs. Pant's firm refusal opened our eyes. It made us change our minds. There is no sense in building luxury hotels here. To enjoy the beauty of the mountains you must be prepared to live close to nature. Indeed, it is more fun roughing it out. We may organize adventure trekking instead," answered Hari.

"Hear, hear! I am glad I was able to drum some
sense into you! Adventure trekking is a much better idea. But remember not to throw trash around!" laughed Mrs. Pant.

Mr. Das, who had been listening with rapt attention, now got up. "If you want tourists to come here, Hari, you must do something else. We must first protect the beauty of the mountains. These kids have just told me a shocking tale. There are people who are out to destroy our beautiful mountains. The kids have found out everything. They have worked it all out. Every detail."

"What do you mean?" asked Hari Lall, puzzled.

"I will tell you as we go. Come on. It is up to us to use the information given by the children to get the criminals caught and put into jail. Enough damage has already been done. Of course, we all knew that our trees were being destroyed. But none knew who the kingpin behind the forest mafia was. Now we know about the hideout and have proof of his crimes. Fortunately, I know just the person whom we must approach, for not everyone would be interested in catching the criminal. Believe me, there are many who are probably involved. Each one of them should be caught. Come, hurry, before the criminal removes the evidence."

"You bet!" said Hari Lall. The three hastened away to carry out their mission.

"One mystery still remains," mused Richa after the others had left. "Did the men really cause the landslide? Or was it a natural phenomenon?"

"Both," answered Ajay, "it is a natural calamity. Human beings are responsible too. They remove the vegetation and expose the soil. They blast the
mountains with dynamite, they make deep holes to mine rocks. They disturb nature in so many different ways and upset the ecological balance."

"No wonder mountains start to fall!" said Richa.
"Well, we did our bit to prevent this mountain from falling!" laughed Rustom.

Just then Ahmed returned with a tray full of goodies to eat. "No more talking, Chhote Nawab. I managed to find this for you to eat. Now come and have it. Look how thin you have become, with all the walking you did in this godforsaken place! What will Begum Sahiba say?"

"Woof! Woof!" Moti was the first to run towards the table. Laughing, the others joined him.
Mystery Of
The Falling Mountains

"Crrr...aa...shh!" Dipak is surprised at the sudden landslide which almost kills him and his friends, Richa, Ajay and Rustom. On a vacation at Dipak's farmhouse, surrounded by thickly wooded ranges and lush green valleys, his friends realize that something is seriously wrong. Many a buyer is eager to acquire the sprawling property of Dipak's mother. When she refuses, her son is kidnapped! Dipak's friends swing into action, only to find that their battle is against a very powerful group of people out to destroy the natural resources for their selfish needs. To find out how the children expose the evil designs of the enemy, read this racy fiction!