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Opening extract from

Grk Smells A Rat!

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Chapter 1

If you were a millionaire, what would you buy?

Yes, of course, you'd buy a house. And then another house. And then a few more houses.

You'd probably buy some cars too. Maybe a couple of planes and helicopters. And a few boats.

But what would you buy next?

A football team? An island? A space station?

If you were so rich that money meant nothing to you, how would you spend your millions?

Vijay Ghat was one of the richest men in India. He had made millions and millions and millions of rupees by gambling on the stock market. He'd made millions of dollars, pounds, yen and euros too.

He employed hundreds of servants, dozens of advisers and an army of highly trained, heavily armed bodyguards.

He owned eleven houses, twenty-eight cars, three planes, two helicopters, twelve boats, two islands and a cricket team. (He didn't like football.)

Although Vijay Ghat didn't yet have his own personal space station, he had employed a group of seventy scientists to build him a rocket and he was intending to fly to the moon as soon as he could.

And he still had masses of money to spare.

So he had decided to buy himself a tennis tournament.

He hired the New Delhi Lawn Tennis Club for a fortnight, booked every room in one of Delhi's finest hotels and paid for some of the world's best young players to fly to India.

Because he wanted everyone to know who had paid for everything, he named the tournament after himself.

Tonight, there was a party to celebrate the opening of the Vijay Ghat International Lawn Tennis Association Under-Sixteen Championship.

All competitors were expected to attend. Their families and coaches were invited too.

A long queue of limousines drove through the tall front gates of Vijay Ghat's immense mansion and dropped guests at the entrance. Valets darted forwards, opened the door of each limousine and ushered the guests onto the long red carpet which led to the front door. There, more servants were waiting, taking the names of guests, making sure no one came inside who hadn't been invited.

TV cameras recorded footage which would be broadcast later on the evening news. Photographers snapped pictures for tomorrow's papers. Journalists scribbled notes in their notebooks, recording the details of who attended the party and what they were wearing.

As a big black Mercedes rolled to a halt, a valet darted forward. Cameras swivelled. Microphones were raised. Pens hovered over the pages of notebooks. The journalists waited to see which celebrity was going to emerge.

The valet opened the door of the Mercedes. Immediately, a dog jumped out of the car and landed on the red carpet.

It was a small dog with black eyes. It had white fur with black patches and a perky little tail.

As soon as its four feet landed on the carpet, the dog turned its head from side to side and sniffed the air, as if it could smell something quite fascinating, not very far away.

The journalists turned to one another, asking all kinds of questions. 'Who is this dog?' said one of them.

'What is he doing here?' said another.

'Why has he been invited?' said a third.

'Does Vijay know him?'

'Is he famous?'

'Does he belong to someone famous?'

'What's so important about him?'

The dog was followed by a boy, who was holding the dog's lead. The boy was followed by another boy, then a girl and then two adults.

When the journalists saw all these people, they immediately lost interest. The journalists could see immediately that not one of them was remotely famous or important. And nor was their dog. Therefore, they were not interesting to the people who watched the evening news or bought a morning newspaper. All the journalists turned their attention to the next limousine in the queue, wondering who was going to emerge from that one, hoping it would be someone really famous. A politician, perhaps. Or a pop star. Or an actress. Someone

whose face would be recognised by everyone who lived in India and whom everyone would want to see on the front page of tomorrow's papers.

Grk, Tim, Max, Natascha and the Malts walked past the pack of journalists and headed for the front door of Vijay Ghat's mansion.

Any of them could have told the journalists that there was one very simple reason why they were here. Not because they were famous. Nor because they were important. No, the reason was this: Max Raffifi had been invited to take part in the Vijay Ghat International Lawn Tennis Association Under-Sixteen Championship and the others had come to support him.

When the Malts and the Raffifis had walked down the carpet, past the servants, through the front door, along the hallway and into the ballroom, they stopped and stood still, speechless with astonishment, not knowing what to say or think.

That's what the Malts and the Raffifis did, anyway. Grk was different. He knew exactly what to do and precisely where he wanted to go. He didn't care about the gold furniture or the elegant paintings. He wasn't interested in the expensive clothes worn by other guests or even their fancy haircuts. He just wanted to run across the room as fast as his little legs would carry him, leap into the air and land on top of one of the tables piled high with food. There, he'd be happy to spend the rest of his life, or at least the rest of the night, eating his way through the stacks of curried chicken and grilled lamb and raw fish that he had been able to

smell since the moment that he stepped out of the limousine.

Unfortunately, he couldn't go anywhere, because he had a collar clasped around his neck. There was a lead attached to his collar and Tim was holding the other end of the lead.

Oh, well. You're allowed to dream, aren't you? Even if you're a small dog on a tight lead. Grk lifted his nose into the air and took long, deep sniffs of all the different delicious scents that were floating around the room.

While Grk was smelling all the food, the Malts and the Raffifis were staring open-mouthed at the most exclusive, expensive and extraordinary party that any of them had ever attended.

The high-ceilinged room was packed with guests and servants. Politicians chatted to pop stars. Industrialists gossiped with actors. Skinny, beautiful women clung to the arms of bald, fat millionaires.

Along the walls, wooden tables creaked under the weight of the vast quantities of food. There were samosas, pakoras, kebabs, idlis and dosas, and every imaginable variety of curry. Great pyramids of rice, flavoured and coloured with saffron, were heaped on huge silver platters alongside little bowls of pickle and chutney. If you didn't like Indian food, you could choose sushi, spaghetti, hamburgers, hot dogs or a hundred different dishes from all around the world.

At one end of the room there was a wooden platform with a microphone on a stand, ready for someone to come and make a speech.

At the other end of the room there was an enormous fountain, which had been built especially for the party. Sprays of brown liquid shot into the air and gurgled down the sides, collecting in a great wide bowl at the bottom. Most fountains flow with water, but this one gushed an unending stream of pure warm chocolate.

Some guests dipped strawberries into the flowing chocolate. Others preferred pineapple chunks or mango slices. The greediest just filled champagne glasses and drank down great gulps of liquid chocolate.

Chapter 2

Staring at millionaires soon gets boring. That's what Tim thought, anyway. He didn't want to talk to them, listen to them or even look at them. He would have been much happier lying in bed, reading a book or watching TV.

To his surprise, the others didn't appear to share his feelings.

Mr Malt was engaged in an animated conversation with a red-faced billionaire, discussing what was wrong with English cricketers and what they could learn from the Indian national team. Mrs Malt was swapping stock market tips with a group of Indian businesswomen. Max was discussing weather conditions with three other tennis players. Only Natascha wasn't involved in a conversation, but she looked perfectly happy to be here: she was wandering through the party with her notebook, jotting down scraps of information and gossip that she overheard. If she'd been an adult, people would have assumed she was a journalist and stopped talking as soon as they saw her, but no one took any notice of a girl.

Even Grk seemed to be happy. He put his nose into the air and sniffed all the extraordinary smells that were filtering through the room, dreaming about the delicious foods that he could have been eating – if only he could slip off his collar and roam freely through the party.

Tim tried to pass the time by eating as much chocolate as possible, but even that wasn't much fun. After two glasses of pure liquid chocolate, six slices of chocolate-covered mango and eleven chunks of chocolate-covered pineapple, he felt quite sick.

Suddenly, a voice shouted across the room, 'Silence! Silence, please! Pray be silent for your host, Vijay Ghat!'

The room went quiet.

Everyone stopped their conversations and turned to face the wooden platform at the end of the room.

Tim popped one final piece of chocolate-covered pineapple into his mouth and wiped the stray chocolate from his lips, then turned to face the platform too.

A small man was standing at the front of the platform, holding a microphone. He was wearing an immaculate black suit, a white shirt and a blue silk tie. With his perfectly polished nails and well-groomed black hair, he looked as if he had never come into contact with dirt.

He leaned forward and spoke into a microphone. 'My name is Vijay Ghat,' he said. 'Welcome to my home.'

He clasped his hand together, palms touching, and made a slight bow. In return, many of his guests did exactly the same gesture back to him.

As you probably know, this gesture is called a *namaste*. It's the way that people greet one another in India.

'Some of you have come from elsewhere in Delhi to be here tonight,' said Vijay Ghat. 'Others have come from Mumbai, Kolkata and other Indian cities. And yet

more of you have travelled many thousands of miles from all around the world. I would like to thank you for making such an effort to be here. Welcome! Welcome, all of you! Welcome to India, to Delhi and to my house!'

There was a ripple of polite applause from the assembled guests. When Tim noticed that everyone else was clapping, he clapped too, although he wasn't sure what he was supposed to be clapping about.

Vijay Ghat held up his hands for silence. 'There is something else that I must say. Something much more important. I want to welcome you not just to my humble home, but to the first Vijay Ghat International Lawn Tennis Association Under-Sixteen Championship.'

This time, the applause was louder and more enthusiastic. At the back of the room, people cheered and whistled.

'Tennis has always been my favourite game,' said Vijay Ghat with a broad smile. 'It is the purest of all games. One man against one man. One woman against one woman. One individual against one individual. All around the world, people love tennis. People play tennis. And people compete in tennis tournaments. You are probably wondering to yourself why I have decided to sponsor another tennis tournament. Aren't there enough already? Does the world really need another?'

Vijay Ghat paused and looked around the room as if he was expecting someone to answer his questions. Of course, no one did. He let the silence continue for a few seconds, then answered his own question himself. 'The

Vijay Ghat International Lawn Tennis Association Under-Sixteen Championship is a tournament concerned entirely with the future. The only players who can enter this tournament are the players of the future. Our children. The children of the world. A few years from now, the world will belong to them. This tournament is their chance to show us what they can do. I am delighted that so many young players have entered the tournament from all around the world and so many of you are here tonight in my humble home. Please, a round of applause for the players!'

This time, Vijay Ghat started the clapping and all his guests followed. Then he held up his hands for silence.

'Now, you have heard enough of my voice. The day after tomorrow, I shall see you at the first match of the Vijay Ghat International Lawn Tennis Association Under-Sixteen Championship. But now let's enjoy ourselves. Eat. Drink. Make merry. Enjoy the party!'

To the accompaniment of loud applause, Vijay Ghat switched off the microphone, stepped down from the platform and started walking through the crowd, meeting his guests. People stepped forward to shake his hand and thank him for his wonderful hospitality.

Wherever he went, Vijay Ghat was surrounded by eight bodyguards, three photographers and four advisers, two on either side, who took turns to speak quietly into his ears, informing him exactly who he was meeting, what they were called, where they came from and why they had been invited to this party. Using this information, Vijay Ghat was always able to ask the right

questions of the right people as if he knew all about them himself.

Vijay Ghat had been walking around the party for more than an hour, accompanied by his crowd of bodyguards, photographers and advisers, when he reached a small group of people standing in a corner of the ballroom: two adults, three children and a dog.

One of the advisers leaned forward and put his mouth close to Vijay Ghat's ear. 'The boy on the left is Max Raffifi,' whispered the adviser. 'A very good player. He won gold medals in Argentina and New Zealand. Most recently, he won the Bethnal Green Challenge Cup. He has a good chance of winning the championship.'

Armed with this information, Vijay Ghat started talking to Max. 'Welcome to my house, Mr Raffifi,' he said. 'I'm so glad that you're here. It is a great pleasure to meet you! I hope you'll have great success in my tournament, just as you did in Argentina, New Zealand and Bethnal Green.'

'Thank you very much,' said Max. 'I hope so too.'

Another of Vijay Ghat's advisers whispered in his other ear. Immediately, Vijay Ghat turned around and focused his attention on another of the children. 'Hello, my young friend,' he said. 'You must be Timothy Malt.'

'That's right,' said Tim. 'I am.'

'I hear you've had great success defeating those wicked Pelotti brothers in Brazil. And this must be your dog, Grk. Am I right?'

Tim nodded, very surprised that Vijay Ghat knew so much about him and his family – and their dog too.

'Hello, Grk,' said Vijay Ghat.

Hearing his name, Grk wagged his tail.

Vijay Ghat said, 'A great pleasure to meet you, Tim, and you too, Grk. And all the rest of you. Have a wonderful evening.' He turned to Max and said, 'Good luck, Max. I hope to see you at the tournament – and I hope you have great success in your games.' With that, Vijay Ghat was gone, moving onwards through the crowd, meeting and greeting more of his guests.

'What a charming man,' said Mrs Malt.

'Not just charming,' said Mr Malt. 'Brilliant, too. He's one of the cleverest and most successful businessmen in the whole of India. He's worth billions. He must be one of the richest men in the world.'

Chapter 3

As you will know if you have read *A Dog Called Grk*, Max Raffifi was one of the world's best young tennis players. He won gold medals in the New Zealand Under-Sixteen Lawn Tennis Cup and the Argentinian Teenage Tennis Open Finals.

After the death of his parents, Max lost interest in games. Batting a ball around a court, counting up the points, trying to beat other people – he couldn't imagine anything so ridiculous. Compared to the murders of his father and mother, tennis seemed trivial.

One day, Mrs Malt suggested to her husband that they should buy him a tennis racket. 'Max takes everything so seriously,' she said. 'Playing a game might be good for him.'

'He has a very good reason for taking things so seriously,' her husband replied.

'But he's only fifteen. You can't carry the woes of the world on your shoulders when you're only fifteen.'

Mr Malt shrugged his shoulders. 'There's no reason not to try, I suppose. But I'll be amazed if he ever plays.'

The following weekend, Mrs Malt took Max to a sports shop and bought him a racket, some shoes, some white shorts and a couple of white shirts. There

was a tennis club near the house. Mrs Malt bought Max a six-month membership. 'If you never play,' she said, 'we won't bother renewing it. But you've got six months to decide.'

For several weeks, Max didn't even go to the club. He always found something better to do. And then, one Saturday morning, without telling anyone where he was going, he changed into his tennis clothes, picked up his racket and wandered down there. He sat beside the courts, watching other people play.

After an hour or two, someone challenged him to a game. Max shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Sure, why not?'

Max hadn't played for a long time. He lost the first point. And the second point. And the third, fourth and fifth.

His arms ached. His legs too. He was tempted to give up and go home. But he forced himself to run from one side of the court to the other, chasing every ball. Gradually, his body seemed to remember how to play tennis. He started winning every point.

He went back the next Saturday. And the Saturday after that. Soon, he was going to the tennis club every day of the week, practising for hours.

People started to find excuses not to play him. They didn't like being beaten. Max found himself without any opponents. That was when he started entering competitions.

He won the first competition that he entered. And the second. And then he won two more. Just as he was

wondering which competition to enter next, he received an invitation to come to India and compete in the Vijay Ghat International Lawn Tennis Association Under-Sixteen Championship.

Chapter 4

Early in the morning, Tim, Natascha, Grk and the Malts left their hotel and took a taxi to New Delhi Railway Station.

The tennis tournament started tomorrow. In his first match, Max had been drawn against an Australian boy named Troy Crown. Today, Max was staying in the hotel, eating, sleeping and thinking through his tactics for tomorrow's game. Meanwhile, the others were taking the train from Delhi to Agra, where they were going to see one of the most famous buildings in the world.

Mr Malt always insisted on arriving at least half an hour early whenever he took public transport and twice that in a foreign country, but today he needn't have bothered. Forty minutes late, the train eased out of the station. Mr Malt glanced at his watch and shook his head, appalled by the delay.

Mr and Mrs Malt were very busy people. Mr Malt worked as an insurance underwriter. Mrs Malt worked as a financial consultant specialising in corporate takeovers. They both had to work extremely hard. They didn't have time to rush off to India, watch tennis tournaments, sit on trains or visit famous buildings.

Or rather, in the old days, they wouldn't have had time. But life has changed. Business has changed. Most importantly, communications have changed. Wherever

you are in the world, you can now continue communicating with your bosses and your colleagues as if you're still sitting at your own desk in your own office.

That was why, as the train chugged through the Indian countryside, neither Mr nor Mrs Malt looked out of the window. They were too busy working. Both of them were hunched over their laptops, staring at the screen and typing quickly, writing reports which they would email back to their offices in London.

Natascha hardly glanced out of the window either. She was absorbed in reading a book called *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. It was the autobiography of a wise man named Mahatma Gandhi. Every few pages, she scribbled some notes in the margin, wanting to record her thoughts about particular passages.

Tim had a book to read too, but he hadn't even opened it. He could read perfectly well at home. While he was here, he wanted to learn more about India and Indians and the way that people lived in this enormous, fascinating, complicated country. So he stared out of the window, watching the landscape thunder past, trying to notice all the ways in which India was different from home.

A man walked through the train, carrying a red bucket in one hand and a metal container in the other. The red bucket was packed with small clay pots.

'*Chai!*' the man called out. '*Chai! Chai! Chai!*'

As you probably know, hundreds of different languages are spoken throughout India, but most people

speak at least some English or Hindi. If you can speak one of those languages, you'll usually manage to find someone who can understand you.

Lots of words in Hindi and English are quite similar. '*Chai*', for instance, is almost the same word in both languages. Can you guess what it means?

Don't worry if you can't. Tim couldn't either. He had no idea what the man might be carrying in his metal container.

Here he came down the corridor, carrying his red bucket and his metal container, swaying in time with the movement of the train.

'*Chai!*' he shouted. '*Chai! Chai! Chai!*' He stopped beside Tim and said, 'You want *chai*?'

'I don't know,' said Tim, peering at the metal container. 'What's *chai*?'

'*Chai* is tea. You know tea?'

'Yes,' said Tim. 'I know tea. Well, I know what tea is, anyway.'

'You want tea?'

'How much does it cost?'

'One rupee.'

'Go on, then,' said Tim. He didn't really like tea, but he liked trying new things. More importantly, he wanted one of the little clay cups. They looked nice. He thought that one rupee was about one tenth of a penny, which seemed like a fair price for a nice small clay pot filled with tea, even if he chose to pour the tea out of the window.

The *chai*-seller put his bucket and his container on the

floor. The container had a small metal tap. That's where the tea came out.

But before the *chai*-seller could pour some tea into one of the small clay pots, Mrs Malt leaned forward and waggled her forefinger at him. 'No!' she said in a loud voice. 'No, thank you! We don't want to buy anything, thank you very much!'

Mrs Malt believed that the best way to communicate with foreigners was to speak slowly and loudly in clear English. In the three days since she arrived in India, this method had worked perfectly well, so she hadn't found any reason to change her beliefs.

The *chai*-seller looked disappointed. 'No tea?'

'No, thank you,' said Mrs Malt. 'We don't want to buy any tea or any coffee or anything else, thank you very much.'

The *chai*-seller gave Tim a sad glance as if to say, 'If you didn't want tea, why did you ask for tea?' Without giving Tim a chance to respond, he picked up his bucket and his container, and continued down the corridor, calling out to everyone in the carriage: '*Chai! Chai! Chai! Chai!*'

When the *chai*-seller's voice had faded, replaced by all the other noises of the train, Mrs Malt turned her attention to her son. She said, 'We've talked about this already, Tim. Haven't we?'

'Yes, Mum.'

'What did I tell you about food and drink?'

'You told me not to eat anything or drink anything.'

'That's not quite true, Tim. Is it?'

'No, Mum.'

'If you didn't eat anything or drink anything, you'd die, and you know perfectly well that I don't want you to die. Don't you?'

'Yes, Mum.'

'I just don't want you to get ill. So what did I actually say?'

'You said I should only drink bottled water,' said Tim. 'And you also said I should only eat food in clean restaurants after I'd washed my hands.'

'Exactly,' said Mrs Malt. 'Clean water and clean hands. Because we don't want to get diarrhoea, do we?'

'No, Mum.'

'If you're thirsty, have some bottled water.'

'I'm not thirsty.'

'Then why did you just try to buy a cup of tea?'

For a moment, Tim considered explaining that he had planned to tip the tea out of the window and keep the little clay cup, but decided not to bother. His mum wouldn't understand. She'd just give him a lecture about cleanliness or money or some other equally boring topic. So he didn't bother saying anything. Instead, he just shrugged his shoulders, slumped back in his seat and stared out of the window.

Chapter 5

A skinny boy walked down the corridor, swaying from side to side with the movement of the train, and stopped beside the Malts.

The boy was wearing dark trousers, a beige shirt and sandals. He must have been ten or eleven years old. He had black hair, gleaming white teeth and a wide smile. In his right hand, he was carrying a big plastic bag.

'Hello,' said the boy. 'Good morning. How are you?'

Without even looking up from her laptop, Mrs Malt said, 'We don't want to buy anything, thank you very much.'

'No problem,' said the boy. 'I am not selling anything at all. I am just here for the chitchat.'

'We don't want any of that either, thank you,' said Mrs Malt, her head bowed over her laptop, her fingers typing quickly, rattling the keys, spitting out sentence after sentence of her report.

'No problem,' said the boy. His smile seemed to get even wider. 'My name is Krishnan. I am very pleased to be meeting you. Please, tell me, where are you from?'

Neither Mr nor Mrs Malt bothered answering. They were too engrossed in what they were writing. Natascha lifted her head quickly and smiled at Krishnan, but didn't answer either, returning her attention immediately

to the pages of her book. So Tim answered for all of them. He said, 'We live in England.'

'England?' Krishnan smiled. 'Very good country. Very good cricket, yes?'

'I suppose so,' said Tim. He wasn't terribly interested in cricket. He'd played a few times at school, but couldn't really see the point.

'Geoff Boycott, Graham Gooch, Andrew Flintoff. You know them?'

'No,' said Tim. 'I don't know them.'

'No problem,' said Krishnan. 'My name is Krishnan. And your name is, please?'

'Tim,' said Tim.

'Welcome to India, Mister Tim. Is this your first time in my country?'

'Yes.'

'You like India?'

'I'm not sure,' said Tim. 'I've only been here for a couple of days. I haven't had a chance to decide yet.'

'Let me tell you, Mister Tim, you will be happy here beyond your wildest dreams. You go now to Agra?'

'Yes.'

'You will see the Taj Mahal?'

'Yes.'

'Have you ever previously seen the Taj Mahal?'

'I've seen one place called the Taj Mahal,' said Tim. 'It's a restaurant near my house. They do delicious chicken korma.'

'No, no, the Taj Mahal is not a restaurant. The Taj Mahal is the most beautiful building in the world. I can

tell you now, Mister Tim, you will be very happy to see the Taj Mahal. You will not believe your eyes.' Krishnan smiled. 'You want to buy one English book?'

'No, thanks,' said Tim. 'I've got enough books.'

'I have many good English books.' Krishnan opened his plastic bag. 'All good books. Many good English words. Fine paper. You want see one English book?'

'No, thanks,' said Tim. 'But you could ask her.' Tim pointed at Natascha. 'She always wants more books.'

Krishnan smiled at Natascha. 'Really? Yes? You would like to buy one good English book?'

'No, thanks,' said Natascha, hardly even lifting her head from the book that she was reading.

'You love books,' said Tim.

'I know I do,' said Natascha. 'But I've got enough.'

'You always say people could never have too many books,' said Tim. 'I've heard you say that a hundred times.'

Natascha sighed. She closed her book, putting her pen between the pages to mark her place, and looked at Krishnan. 'Go on, then. What have you got? What are you selling?'

'I have many good English books,' said Krishnan. 'I can supply whatever you wish. Big books. Small books. Funny books. Sad books. I can give you them all. Today, I have one fine copy of Harry Potter. You know Harry Potter?'

'Yes,' said Natascha. 'I've read all the Harry Potters.'

'Harry Potter is a very good magic boy.'

'Yes, I know,' said Natascha. 'I just told you, I've read them all.'

'Here, I have one very good Harry Potter book.' Krishnan reached into his bag and pulled out a copy of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. 'You want to buy this most excellent book?'

'I told you, I've read it already. I've read them all.'

'But this is a very good price.'

'How much?'

'Three hundred rupees.' Krishnan smiled. 'Very good book, very cheap price.'

'Three hundred rupees,' said Natascha. 'What's that in English money?'

Without looking up from the screen of his laptop, Mr Malt said, 'About four pounds.'

'Gosh, that is cheap,' said Natascha, suddenly wavering. She took the book from Krishnan's hand and stared at the clean, smooth, unbroken spine. She could see immediately that this copy of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* was brand new and unread. It was a bargain. Natascha nodded at Krishnan. 'All right, I'll buy it.'

Krishnan was delighted. 'You are my first customer today,' he said. 'I am very, very happy.'

'I'm happy too,' said Natascha.

'You happy, me happy,' said Krishnan with a big smile. 'This is good. We are all happy.'

From her purse, Natascha counted out three hundred rupees in crumpled old notes. When they had arrived in India, Mr Malt had given her and Tim a thousand rupees

each as pocket money. Until now, Natascha hadn't spent a single rupee.

'Thank you, thank you,' said Krishnan, taking the money and quickly counting the notes. Satisfied, he stuffed them into the pocket of his shirt and handed the book to Natascha. 'Please, you will enjoy this book very much.'

'Thanks,' said Natascha, opening the book and flicking through the first few pages.

Krishnan grinned at Tim. 'You want to buy one book?'

'No, thank you,' said Tim.

'Another time, maybe.'

'Maybe,' said Tim.

'Okey-dokey,' said Krishnan. 'Thank you for your customer. I hope you will have a most wonderful time in the Taj Mahal. Goodbye.'

Krishnan turned and walked away.

At that moment, Tim noticed something strange.

Behind Krishnan's right ear there was a little blue blotch. It looked a little bit like a wart, a birthmark or a stain.

Most people wouldn't have noticed anything unusual. And even if they had, they wouldn't have been very interested. If they'd happened to spot a blue blotch on the back of a boy's ear, they would simply have assumed that he hadn't washed himself properly. He'd been mucking around with a broken biro, they'd have said to themselves, or fallen asleep on a damp blue pillow.

But Tim had sharper eyesight than most people. He took a good long look at the small blueish blotch on the underside of the boy's ear and saw that it wasn't actually a wart, a birthmark or a stain, but a tiny, intricate tattoo of a rat.

A small blue rat with a long wriggly tail.

Tim was intrigued. He'd never seen a tattoo on the back of someone's ear before. He wondered why Krishnan had tattooed his ear with a blue rat and what it might mean. But there was no chance to find out. Before Tim could say anything, both Krishnan and his bag of books had gone into the next carriage.