

A stylized illustration of a firefighter in an orange suit and yellow helmet, viewed from the side, kneeling on a tiled roof. The firefighter is looking towards a large, intense fire that is spreading across the roof. The fire is depicted with bright orange and red flames and thick, dark grey smoke billowing upwards. The scene is set against a bright, clear sky.

UNDER FIRE

Written by Katie Pyle
Illustrated by Samidha Gunjal

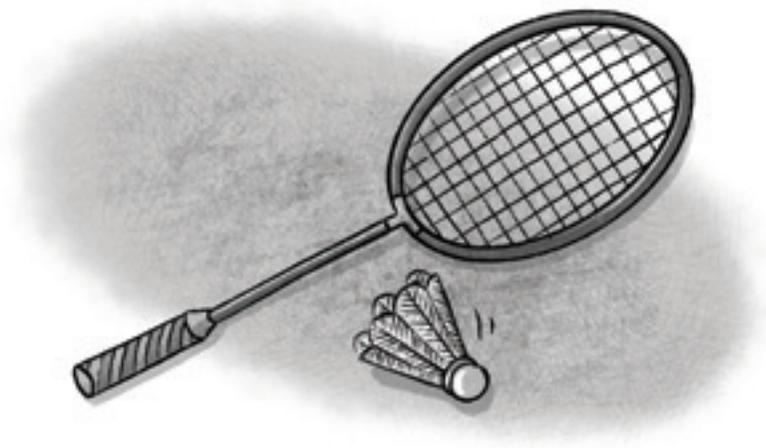
A special thanks to Ashwitha Jayakumar for editing the story and to Reema Govil for all her inputs.

UNDER FIRE



Written by Katie Pyle

Illustrated by Samidha Gunjal



Chapter 1

“**T**here he is!” shouted a teenage boy, tall for his age with shortly cropped hair. He was hollering to a group of three other boys who were also on their bicycles. They sped towards the front of the apartment building they all lived in. They jumped off their bicycles and, looking knowingly at each other, marched over to a boy and his younger sister who were playing badminton. The tall boy led the way.

“Hey, stupid,” said the tall boy, the ringleader of the little gang. The boy playing badminton missed his shot and the shuttlecock fell.

“What do you want, Aarav?” said the boy, bending to pick up the shuttlecock. His voice didn’t quiver but he moved to stand closer to his sister, creating a barrier between her and Aarav. He was short for his age, like his sister who was a few years younger than him.

“What do I want? WHAT do I want? Well, Stupid-Sachin, I don’t know, let me think,” said Aarav, holding his hand up to his chin and pretending to ponder. He moved closer to Sachin, and lowered his face until it was inches away from Sachin’s. The gang of boys edged around Aarav and

his sister like well-trained soldiers. Feet apart, arms folded, they stared silently down.

Aarav was peering into Sachin's eyes, scowling and sneering at him. Sachin remained quiet, not showing his emotions. He looked straight ahead while putting his hands behind him, keeping his sister close.

"Hmmm," said Aarav. "Today...I want your racket." And without taking his eyes off Sachin, Aarav pulled the racket out of Sachin's hand. He gave one final stare, whipped his eyebrows up at Sachin, turned and walked away calmly. His gang followed silently.



Misha was crying softly. Sachin noticed his sister's tears as he turned around after Aarav was far enough away not to cause any more trouble.

"Why did he do that?" Misha asked between sobs, her voice cracking. She looked up plaintively at her elder brother. Sachin was shaking but was desperately trying not to show Misha.

"I don't really know, Misha," said Sachin. "Maybe he's bored and also wants to play badminton," shrugging off Aarav's obvious nastiness to ease his sister's concerns. "Don't worry, it's too windy for badminton today anyway, Misha."

Not disclosing the fact that this kind of interaction was a daily occurrence for Sachin at school, at football, wherever he came face-to-face with Aarav, Sachin led his sister back to the main entrance of the apartment building. A daily barrage of name-calling was the norm these days for Sachin. Aarav's slew of insults alluded mostly to Sachin's academic ability: nerd, geek, dork. Aarav had taken his favourite pen, sweets, money and all sorts of other small things. But this was the first time Aarav had bothered Sachin in the apartment complex. Now that he'd gathered a gang of younger boys who lived there around him, Aarav was obviously feeling confident enough to get to him here too, Sachin agonised to himself.

They walked up the stairs to the second floor, just below the top floor, where Aarav lived with his parents. It was not a large apartment complex and maybe 30 families lived there across the four levels. Sachin and Misha's living room overlooked the densely packed car park by the main gate while Aarav's flat was on the opposite side where there was a small patch of grass. Sachin had recently seen some baby squirrels scurrying around the trees there.



“Hey Ma!” said Sachin, pretending to be cheery as he walked through the front door. He didn’t want his mum finding out what was going on with Aarav. He nudged Misha, who understood but an unconvincing hello escaped her mouth. Their mother didn’t notice, however. She was busy gathering up a few things into her handbag and putting on her shoes.

“I’m off to meet your dad after his football practice. Then we’re heading to see Seema aunty so we won’t be back till later, OK? Make sure you do your homework you two, and not too much TV!”

Planting a kiss each on Misha and Sachin’s foreheads, she was out of the door. The two of them crashed down onto the sofa and turned on the TV. They sat in silence as they watched a new show that had just started. Everyone was talking about it. A bunch of people had been dropped off on a remote island somewhere with nothing and had to find a way to survive with whatever they could find. It sounded interesting.



Chapter 2

A little later, Aarav turned on the TV in his house to watch the same show. He'd messed around with the boys for a bit outside. He had whacked some stones with his 'new' badminton racket and spun it round to issue challenges to each of the boys every time the handle pointed to one of them. Write a slang word on the bottom of one of the swings they were hanging off, turn the outdoor tap on and run away or knock on someone's door and hide around the corner.

After a while Aarav had gotten bored, sent the boys on their way, thumped the '3' button in the lift and gone up to his family's apartment on the top floor. On his way to the sofa, he had noticed that one of the lit candles from the pooja room was by the window. His mum must have forgotten to put it back when she was dusting this morning. She's always distracted with so many tasks, Aarav thought to himself as he sank deep into the sofa. Mum or Dad can put it back when they're back from their walk.

Amused at the thought of people stuck on a remote island, Aarav started watching the TV show full of anticipation. After half an hour, though, he was bored. There's not much to this, really. It seems so fake, he thought to himself. He took himself off the sofa and into the kitchen in search of something to eat.

One floor down, Sachin and Misha were also bored. "This just looks set-up," Misha commented, "I'm sure someone we can't see is giving them food to eat."

"Yeah, you're probably right!" said Sachin. "Why don't we go back outside? I'm sure Aarav won't be there anymore and I want to show you those baby squirrels, remember? The ones I saw around the back of the apartment!"

"Oh yes, great! Let's see if we can find them," said Misha, excitedly.





Chapter 3

In the kitchen, Aarav heard the loud swoosh of a gust of wind. The window panes were rattling. He told himself to remember to close the living room window when he went back inside to stop the dust coming in.

He poured himself a drink and found some chapattis and a paneer curry in the fridge. Bingo! He heated up the food. "This smells better than whatever Sunitha aunty is cooking downstairs," he muttered to himself. "Whatever she's making is burning!" He scrunched up his nose and made a face.

Laughing to himself, Aarav picked up the plate of food he'd prepared for himself. He had every intention of breaking his mum's rule and eating on the sofa rather than at the table.

He walked out of the kitchen. Still smirking to himself at his planned defiance of his mother's rules, Aarav's eye caught something across the living room. He dropped his plate of food and froze.



Chapter 4

Sachin and Misha had come downstairs and gone outside through the main door of the apartment building. They were chatting about the baby squirrels as they walked around the outside of the apartment building towards the patch of grass and trees where Sachin had last seen them.

“What’s that shouting?” asked Misha suddenly.

“What shouting? I can’t hear anything,” Sachin responded.

“Be quiet, listen! It sounds like someone needs help.”

It was distant at first but as they continued quickly towards the grass patch it became clearer and clearer. “HELP!” they heard, “PLEASE HELP ME! THERE’S A FIRE!”

“A fire!” both Misha and Sachin repeated, shocked.

“I can’t see where,” screamed Misha. “Where are they shouting from?”

They both ran towards the voice, looking up and down.

“Where are you? Hello? Tell me where you are,” shouted Sachin.

“Up here, look higher, please help, there’s a fire in my apartment,” the voice sounded desperate. The voice sounded familiar.

“Oh no, no no! That’s Aarav, Misha, look up there, on the top floor. The window on the left.”

“Help me, please! There’s a lot of smoke!”

“Oh my god,” cried Misha, “What are we going to do? We can’t reach him.”

“Stay calm, Aarav. We’re going to help you,” Sachin yelled as loudly as he could. He turned to his sister.

“Misha, you need to go to the main gate now. Tell them to call the fire brigade. Tell them there’s a fire at Bridgestone Court. Go quickly!”

Aarav shouted from above again. “Sachin, you have to help me, I’m trapped. The fire is blocking the way to the front door...” Aarav paused for breath. He was struggling to talk. “There was a candle by the window, the curtain, I think it must have caught the curtain...the wind was strong... I don’t know, help me...please.” Aarav was struggling to make himself understood.

“Save your breath, Aarav, and tell me, are you alone? Is there anyone else with you?”

“I’m alone, I’m alone...”

“Sachin!” Misha shouted from the other direction. She came running back towards her brother. “What’s the number? What’s the number? No one knows the number to call the fire brigade,” Misha was panting because she’d run so fast.

“101, call 101... And ask the watchman for the megaphone. Remember that one we used that time for the sports festival last year?” Sachin added.

“Huh? What for?” asked Misha, stopping in her tracks. But Sachin had turned his attention back to Aarav and Misha knew she had to call the fire brigade as quickly as she could.

“Aarav!” shouted Sachin up to the third floor window, “Which room are you in?”

“Erm, the bedroom, Mum and Dad’s bedroom...help me, please!” He was coughing and spluttering.

“Stay as calm as you can. Where is the fire?”

“In the living room.”

“OK, Aarav, I need you to close the bedroom door.”

“I’m scared, Sachin, there’s smoke, so much smoke.”

“I know, I know. But listen to me, close the bedroom door. This will help to block the smoke and heat from coming into the room. Go, go!” Sachin explained.

Misha came running back just then. “Sachin! I did it. They’re coming, the fire brigade are coming! And here is the megaphone. The watchman found it.”

Sachin didn't react, he was staring anxiously up at the window. A moment later, Aarav's head was visible by the window again.

"I closed...urgh, urgh,...the door, Sachin," Aarav was coughing as he tried to speak loudly enough for Sachin to hear.

Relief swept over Sachin when he saw Aarav back at the window. "OK, now, go and look for a towel, cloth or a bedsheet. Make it wet, go to your parents' bathroom which is attached to this room. It must be to your left, like in our house, use the tap there. Then put it across the gap between the door and the floor. Go quickly!"

"I can't Sachin, urgh...I...can't. Can I jump? I'm going to jump..." Aarav sounded desperate.

"NO! Aarav, no! It's OK...Listen to me. It's too high. You can't jump," said Sachin immediately, putting his arms up in the air, palms up towards Aarav in a 'stop' motion.

Aarav's head was covered in sweat. He was scared. Beyond anything he'd ever felt. But Sachin was right. He couldn't jump, it was too high... But maybe he could if it got worse. He was confused and he couldn't concentrate. The room was filling up with smoke.

"A ladder, Sachin, get a ladder..." Aarav coughed.

A ladder. Sachin hadn't even thought of it. "Erm, yes... Misha..." Sachin began but he didn't have a chance to finish his sentence.

"There isn't one..." said Misha, "I've already asked the watchman." Misha looked pleadingly at Sachin and then up to Aarav who'd heard what she said.

Sachin took in what Misha said. He had to stay calm for Aarav.

“Aarav, listen to me. Go and put a wet cloth by the door like I told you to.” Aarav was dizzy and confused. Sachin’s voice was loud and clear. He didn’t know what else to do but follow Sachin’s instructions.

Sachin saw Aarav’s head duck away from the window.

Sachin turned to Misha. He saw one of the watchmen had followed her back to the building as well as Madhavi aunty who lived on the ground floor. They were looking up at the windows of Aarav’s apartment, horrified. Smoke was starting to come out of one of the other windows.

Sachin addressed them all. “One of you take the megaphone and walk around the building. Tell people to get out of the building as quickly as they can as there’s a fire. Tell them not to use the lift but use the stairs. If you don’t have the megaphone, you can just shout loudly. Alert as many people as you can but do not go into the building!”



Chapter 5

Misha, the watchman and Madhavi aunty rushed off, shouting around the building, Madhavi aunty with the mega-phone. “Erm, get out, everyone! Everyone in Bridgestone Court! There’s a fire on the third floor. **GET OUT OF THE BUILDING. USE THE STAIRS! QUICKLY!**”

Sachin felt nervous. The seconds Aarav had been away from the window felt like hours. Aarav’s head popped back into the window. He looked terrified.

“I, I, I’ve—I’ve—done it. Hurry, it’s so hot in here. I can’t breathe.”
“Take another wet cloth and put it over your mouth! Go! Don’t panic. The fire brigade are on their way. And Aarav, crawl along the floor...there’s less smoke lower down.”

Sachin heard more and more commotion coming from the front of the building. Then he saw Madhavi aunty rushing back towards him.



“The fire brigade are here...but they can’t get through to this side of the building. The passage between the cars is not wide enough. We have to wait until people are out and can move their cars.”

Sachin was sweating himself. Aarav was trapped, the fire would spread quickly and they didn’t have much time left.

“What if people don’t have their car keys? Tell them Aarav is trapped. Others might be in danger too! We have to get the fire brigade through!” Sachin was panicking.

Aarav was back at the window. Sachin had to remain calm for him. He looked over his shoulder and saw Madhavi aunty run back to the front of the building where the commotion was building and building. Some of the firefighters were instructing people to keep away from the building. Two of the firefighters ran towards Sachin. Madhavi aunty had told them someone was trapped on the top floor.

Assessing the situation quickly, the firefighters radioed through for their team to bring in a loose ladder. There was no time to waste. They couldn’t wait for the fire engine to come through.

Aarav could see the firefighters below. He was panting, his head far out of the window. He could hardly get his words out.

“It is so hot, I can’t breathe...fire, there’s fire in the room...help me please...” his voice was barely audible now, three stories below. He was coughing with every breath.

“Aarav! Stay calm,” Sachin was scared himself but he had to stay focused.

“Did you see that show? Errr, ‘Deserted Island’?” Sachin was thinking of ways to distract Aarav from what was going on.

“Yeah, what—what rubbish, man!” Aarav managed to say, between coughs.

“Yeah, I know. It’s so fake! I’m sure it’s set up,” Sachin said.

“Maybe—maybe we have more—in common—than I—thought,” Aarav said.

Sachin realised that Aarav was really struggling to talk now.

“Aarav, just keep quiet, don’t waste your energy talking. I’m here though...” Sachin didn’t know what else to do.

Just then the firefighters came bounding back with the loose ladder. They quickly positioned it against the building and one of the men started climbing up. Sachin could feel the relief spreading over his body as one of them reached the window. But it was short-lived. Sachin could now see flames coming out of the window and thick, thick smoke. One of the other firefighters pulled Sachin back and away from the building. Tears were streaming down Sachin’s face as he watched helplessly.

The firefighter reached the window and grabbed hold of Aarav quickly and pulled him out of the window head-first onto the ladder on his stomach. Flames and smoke were pouring out of the window. There was no time to waste as the firefighter pulled Aarav down the ladder on his stomach head-first. They bungled down the ladder onto the floor. Aarav was barely conscious now. Another firefighter picked him up with rapid speed and ran off towards the front of the building.

Sachin ran after Aarav and the firefighter, just in time to see Aarav being put in the back of an ambulance. The doors closed and the ambulance sped off out of the car park.

Sachin was rooted to the spot. He looked around him through his

welled-up eyes. He was trying to take it all in. All the families from his community were standing around, away from the building, near the main gate. Some were crying, some shouting, others silent. No one could believe what was going on. Sachin spotted Misha. She was standing with Sharada aunty. He ran to her and hugged her tightly. They were both shaking.

“Where’s Aarav?” asked Misha, softly. She was worried about what Sachin was going to say.

“They’ve taken him off in an ambulance...” Sachin could barely get the words out. “We should call his parents.”

“I’ve done it,” said Sharada aunty. No one knew what else to say.

One of the fire engines had managed to get into a position where they could fight the fire from the outside. Some of the cars had been moved away. Sachin wondered how. Did everyone help to push them away in the end? Two firefighters came out of the building. Sachin could see the sweat on their faces and the tension in their brows as they took off their masks.

“They went in to see if anyone else was trapped. We had no idea if anyone else was in the building. No one has seen the Guptas,” Sharada aunty said, sounding anxious.

“They’re away this weekend,” said Sachin, “Ajay told me they were going for their cousin’s wedding.”

“No one knew,” Sharada aunty said, tersely, “These firemen are risking their lives for us.”

The crew of firefighters seemed calmer now. Sachin heard one of them

say the fire was under control. They'd checked the apartments and there was no one left inside.

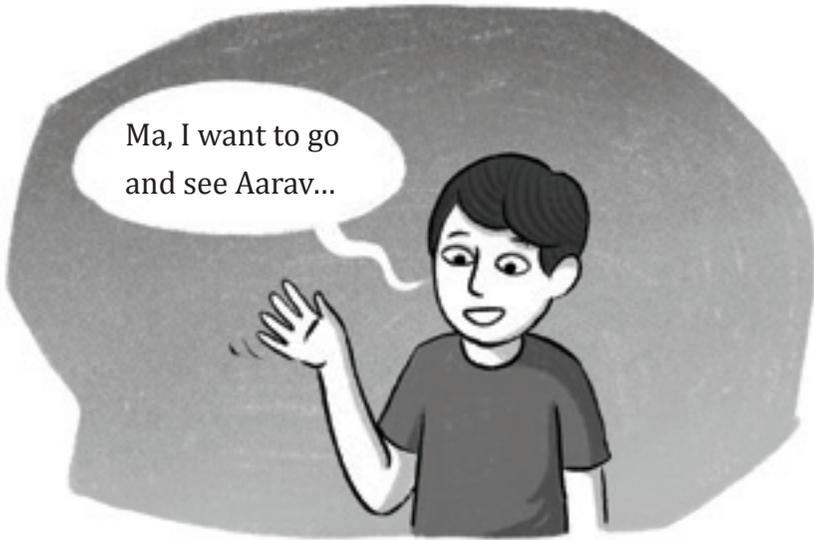
One of the firefighters walked towards Sachin.

"You were lucky, this could have been much worse. Thanks to your quick thinking, young man, I think you might have saved your friend's life," he said.

"My friend...hmmm, my friend? Oh, Aarav you mean," Sachin said, bemused. Friend. Hardly. But Sachin was desperate to know how he was.

"There's so much more that could have been done to avoid all this though..." the firefighter said.

Sachin nodded. But his mind was with Aarav.



Chapter 6

“Ma, I want to go and see Aarav...” Sachin was pleading with his mother the day after the fire.

“Darling, you know that he doesn’t want to see anyone. He’s suffering from shock and smoke inhalation. Aarav’s mum told you when she called you to thank you. He’s OK though, don’t worry. I also spoke to Sharada aunty and she said he’s out of hospital. The family are staying with Aarav’s uncle for now until the apartment is safe to live in again.”

“Why do you want to see him anyway? He was so mean to you,” Misha asked when they were out of earshot of their mother. They were also staying with family for now.

“I don’t know. I just want to see for myself that he’s OK,” Sachin wasn’t really sure himself. He just felt something had changed between them during the fire. But he hadn’t seen or heard from Aarav since it happened. Aarav’s mum had called him to say thank you, but that was it.



Chapter 7

Sachin and his family had been staying with their uncle and aunt for two weeks when his mother told them that the fire brigade had finished with their investigation into the fire.

“Apparently, the cause of the fire was a candle. It had been left by a window, too close to the curtains. It was really windy on the day of the fire so they think there was a gust of wind and the candle flame caught the curtain and set off the fire,” explained Sachin’s mum. She paused. Thinking about the fire made her anxious. She felt so glad that Sachin and Misha were OK. It was all so surreal. Her son had been a real hero. Madhavi aunty had told her how Sachin had shown real maturity. He’d saved Aarav’s life.

“Wow, I never thought a candle could cause all this,” said Misha.

“You know, Sachin, how did you know what to do when the fire broke out?” asked Misha. “You knew the number to call, helped to ensure every

one got out of the building, kept Aarav calm and told him how to keep the smoke out of the room... You were amazing, Sachin," Misha echoed their mum's thoughts.

"I saw a documentary on TV once. I remembered some things from it," said Sachin. He didn't think of himself as amazing at all.

"Oh wow. Much better than that terrible Deserted Island show we were watching that day, eh?" said Misha. Sachin nodded and laughed softly.

"You know, they're going to start rebuilding the apartment soon," said Sachin's mum.

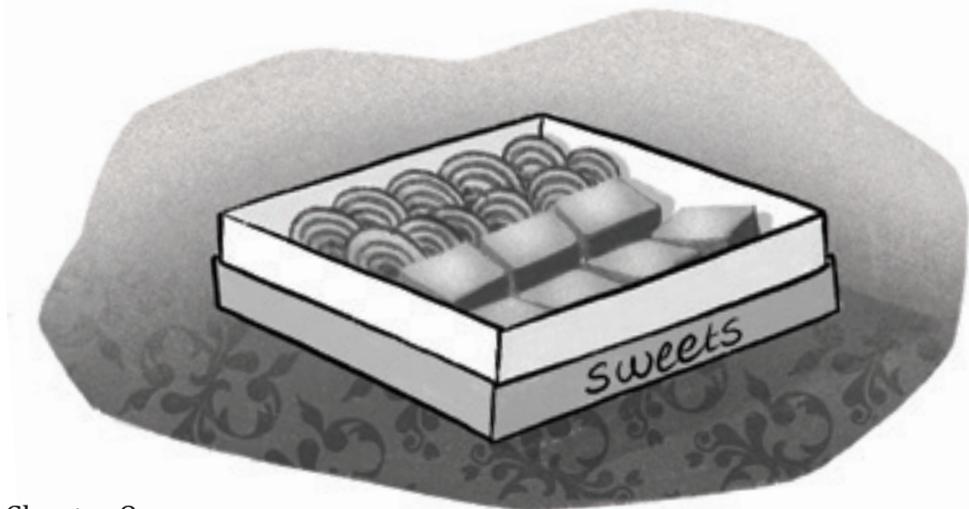
"Oh really," answered Sachin, suddenly deep in thought.

"You know... one of the firefighters said there was more we could have done to avoid the fire and the extent of the damage. I wonder what he meant," said Sachin after a while.

"Well, why don't we ask them?" said Misha.

"Good idea! We could go down to the fire station," said Sachin, smiling.

"We should also thank them for everything they did to stop the fire and saving Aarav."



Chapter 8

The next day at the fire station, Sachin said an emotional thank you to the firefighters. Seeing them again had brought all the raw feelings of the day back to him. He'd brought them sweets, although he didn't think sweets were enough. Nothing would be enough.

"We're going to put on too many kilos with all these sweets!" laughed one firefighter. "Your friend brought us some yesterday too!"

"My friend?" Sachin queried. "Which one of my friends was here?"

"Aarav. You know...you saved his life."

Aarav. Thought Sachin to himself. He was here...in the fire station. Sachin hadn't seen Aarav since the fire. His mum had told him that Aarav didn't want to see anyone at home and Aarav also hadn't been to school. But he'd been here.

"It was all of you who saved Aarav's life and put out the fire," Sachin said. "Sweets will never be a big enough thank you."

"You know what would be the best thank you?" said one of the

firefighters. “We said the same to Aarav yesterday. The best thank you would be if we can educate you on fire safety.”

“Oh, yes, absolutely! In fact, we wanted to ask you exactly the same thing,” Sachin said. Misha nodded in agreement.

“There’s actually three parts to fire safety,” began the firefighter. He motioned for Sachin and Misha to come and sit down at the table. He poured some water for them. Two other firefighters sat with them.

“The first is how a building is built in the first place. There are regulations for buildings that have a large number of floors but they’re good to have in all buildings. This includes things like installing smoke detectors, fire extinguishers and having outside stairwells. It’s also important to have enough space around a building for a fire engine to drive through.”

“Gosh, I didn’t know there were rules about this!” Sachin said. “It makes so much sense... Bridgestone Court didn’t have any of these things when the fire broke out,” he added, thoughtfully.

“Second, is our own personal behaviour,” the firefighter continued. “This means things like leaving candles and other flames in sensible places and not unattended. The same applies when cooking. We shouldn’t leave a stove unattended. We should also routinely have our electrics checked and not overload our plug points.”

Sachin was listening attentively. “My mum said the fire in Bridgestone Court was caused by a candle flame catching a curtain. It could have so easily been prevented.”

“Yes, you’re right. Many fires start because of unattended flames. People don’t realise how easily fires can start and how quickly they spread,” said another firefighter.

“I didn’t. That a candle can cause such a big fire, it’s crazy. We use candles every day at home,” Misha reflected.

“Third is knowing what to do if a fire does break out. You seem to already know a lot about this Sachin...we heard you told Aarav to cover his mouth with a wet cloth and to stay down low to the ground. This is really important and will help with breathing. Knowing the emergency number is also vital to make sure the fire brigade can come as quickly as possible.” Sachin nodded. “There’s so much to fire safety, I had never thought about it like this before. But, how can we make sure people do this? Or, you know, that we do all this in our new building?” Sachin was a little overwhelmed. He took a sip of water.

“Well, you can try and find out who is overseeing the rebuilding of Bridgestone Court. Then you can bring all this to their attention. We can help with that.”

Sachin scratched his head, he wished he’d written it all down. There was quite a lot to remember.

“When the building is built, then we can also come and run a fire safety session with everyone,” the firefighter said as he got up. He went to a nearby cupboard and took out a leaflet. He handed it to Sachin.

“Here’s some information about everything we’ve said. Have a look at it and let’s see if we can do something for Bridgestone Court.”

“OK,” Sachin said and took the leaflet from the firefighter, glancing over it. He and Misha stood up and thanked them all again. Sachin’s head was spinning. He was wondering how much he could really do. He was just a kid at the end of the day. He wasn’t the one in charge of rebuilding Bridgestone Court.



Chapter 9

After visiting the fire station, Aarav was back at his uncle's house with his mum.

"I nearly died because of this fire," Aarav reflected. "If there had been a smoke alarm installed in our apartment, I would have been alerted to the fire sooner when I was in the kitchen heating up my food."

"Yes, that's true..." said Aarav's mum. "And it's not just that. There wasn't enough space for the fire engine to get to the building to fight the fire." Like Sachin's mum, Aarav's mum felt very emotional when she talked about the fire. Her son was lucky to be alive. She didn't want Aarav to know how anxious she'd been so she tried her best to hide her feelings.

"Mum, how are they doing all this rebuilding of our building, following the fire?" Aarav asked. "I mean like, are they just redoing it as it was or what? Who even decides all this? The firefighters said we should speak to whoever is overseeing things to bring all these things to their attention."

"Well, from what I understand the Residents' Association is discussing the insurance claim and will plan the building works."

“What is the Residents’ Association?” asked Aarav.

“It’s the association that oversees all the centralised parts of our apartment, like the shared space, the watchmen, the gardeners, the lights in the corridors...that kind of thing. We pay a maintenance charge to them every month and they decide how to spend the budget.”

“Who’s in that association then?” asked Aarav. “I didn’t even know we had this.”

“Well, I think Rahul uncle from Number 3 is the chairman. I suppose technically we are all part of it, everyone who lives in the building. But I haven’t ever been to any meetings.”

Aarav was deep in thought.

“Mum, I want to meet Rahul uncle and the association. I want to talk to them about how they’re rebuilding our apartment,” said Aarav after a while. “Our apartment needs smoke alarms and fire extinguishers and more space for fire engines to get in. What if we have another fire?” Aarav said, animatedly.

Aarav’s mum stopped folding the laundry. She looked at Aarav and paused. Aarav hadn’t said much about what had happened since the fire. He hadn’t wanted to go to school or see anyone. She’d tried to coax him gently to speak to Sachin. To say thank you. But Aarav went quiet whenever she mentioned Sachin’s name. She didn’t want to push her son too hard. He’d nearly died. It was almost a relief to hear him speak about the fire now, finally. Visiting the fire station the previous day had helped. It seemed Aarav was motivated to do something about what happened. She was pleased.

“You’re right. You’re right. I don’t know if children can be part of the

meetings though,” Aarav’s mum reflected.

“Well, we should be allowed,” said Aarav. “We live there too,” he added.

“I agree, let me talk to Rahul uncle.”

Aarav smiled a little. This was important. This was essential. This was something he could do. This was something Sachin would do. Sachin... Sachin, Aarav had thought about him a lot over the last few weeks. He hadn’t wanted to see Sachin. Despite everything Sachin had done for him. He was embarrassed, confused. Why had Sachin saved him? He’d been so mean to him, calling him names, stealing his badminton racket. There was nothing he could say to Sachin to make up for his behaviour. Aarav felt deeply ashamed.



Chapter 10

“Hi Sachin,” said Rahul uncle. “Welcome to the Residents’ Association meeting. Is your friend joining you?”

“My friend?” Sachin questioned.

But Rahul uncle didn’t hear him, as he greeted several more people entering the room.

“Hey...Sachin! How are you, what are you doing here?” asked one neighbour as she walked in and took a seat around the table.

“I’m OK, thanks aunty,” Sachin said.

“So, Sachin is here to talk to us about fire safety in Bridgestone Court after everything that happened,” Rahul uncle announced.

“Yes,” Sachin nodded.

“Well, actually, more than just general fire safety,” Sachin continued. “I spoke to the fire brigade and they said there are many things that can be factored into the design of a building which can help with fire safety. I want to ask you to consider them as our apartment is rebuilt.”

As Sachin was talking, Aarav was making his way quickly into the building. He was late for the meeting. Trying to catch his breath, he paused by the closed door of the room in which the meeting was taking place. As he took deep breaths, he peered through the window in the door and was shocked to see Sachin sitting in the room, talking to the members of the Residents’ Association.

What’s he doing here? Aarav thought to himself. How can I face him? Aarav hadn’t seen Sachin since the fire. Deliberately so. But now Sachin was there. Sachin who he had bullied, Sachin who he’d picked on and called names. Sachin who had saved his life. He didn’t know what to say to him.

Aarav’s breathing steadied and he listened as the conversation inside the room continued.

“Oh, well, that sounds like a good idea,” said Rahul uncle. “What kind of things do you mean?”

“Well, erm, adding smoke alarms in the building and fire extinguishers...” Sachin started.

Outside the room Aarav was shocked. Sachin was also there talking about fire safety!

Encouraged by nods from the adults in the room, Sachin continued, “And also external stairwells and more space in the car park so fire engines can get in.”

The adults were looking around the room at each other. One or two now looked less convinced.

“That’ll cost a lot,” said one woman.

“Yes, I agree. I think in our budget there won’t be enough money for that,” added another man.



“Rearrange our whole car park! We’re only a small apartment block. I’m sure these things only apply to larger buildings. I’d rather build a swimming pool on the terrace, you know. What are the chances of another fire breaking out? And if it did, we could use the water from the pool to fight the fire, haha!” Suresh uncle said, laughing to himself.

Sachin sank back into his chair, dismayed. Though not everyone was laughing along about the swimming pool, Sachin’s suggestions were not being met with much enthusiasm.

Outside, Aarav was gritting his teeth. This committee is not taking this seriously, he thought to himself.

“We’ll think about it, Sachin, and take a vote.” Rahul said. But it was clear that most of the committee didn’t see much value beyond the smoke alarms and extinguishers. “There are some other things we’d like to do to the building now it’s being rebuilt... like, maybe some new leisure facilities.”

“Who will vote on it?” asked Sachin.

“All the homeowners of course,” said Rahul uncle.

“But what about me? And the other children?” asked Sachin.

“You don’t get a vote, little man. You’ll have to wait a few years,” laughed Suresh uncle.

Outside the room, Aarav could feel his blood boiling.

“I nearly died!” Aarav cried, bursting through the door into the meeting. Everyone in the room went silent. Aarav stood by the door, looking around the room, breathing deeply, trying to stay as composed as he

could but he could feel his eyes welling up. Sachin was shocked to see Aarav there, suddenly in front of him after so long.

“You know, the reason you all got out that building alive is because of Sachin. He knew what to do, he knew the number for the fire brigade, he told Misha to get the mega phone and alert you all.” Aarav had tears streaming from his eyes, his voice trembling. His face was red and his hands clenched together.

“Just because we are kids, doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have a say in the building,” Aarav added. Then he stormed out in frustration. Sachin got up slowly, nodding in silent agreement with Aarav. He looked around the room, then turned and followed Aarav out of the door, without saying another word.



Chapter 11

Aarav was sitting on a bench outside the hall where the Residents' Association was meeting. Sachin sat down next to him. Aarav had his head in his hands. Sachin didn't know where to look. But he had put it together now. Aarav had wanted to come to the Residents' Association to do the same thing he did: to ask for better fire safety in the building. It was somehow comforting to know they wanted the same thing. Something had changed in Aarav since the fire.

Aarav looked sideways. He was surprised to see it was Sachin who had sat down next to him.

I had to see him sometime, Aarav thought to himself. He still didn't know what to say to Sachin, sorry, thank you... forgive me. So much had happened between them. Nothing he could say would make up for what he'd done and the fact he owed his life to Sachin. He'd thought that maybe by getting the building designed better in terms of fire safety, he could fix some of the wrongs he'd done. But I can't even get that right, he thought to himself.

The boys sat in silence.

“He was mocking you, you know, Sachin. Suresh uncle and his swimming pool idea...” Aarav finally muttered to break the silence. “It’s not right,” he continued, “They should take you seriously”.

“I know, Aarav,” Sachin said quietly. “Thanks for sticking up for me like that.” Somehow it was Sachin saying thank you to Aarav, despite everything that had happened. It seemed to come easier to him than to Aarav.

Sachin wasn’t sure it was the time to reflect on Aarav’s behaviour in the past... but maybe it could help.

“You know, when it happened to me before, I didn’t let that stop me from doing the right thing...” Sachin’s voice tailed off.

Aarav looked up. He knew Sachin was talking about what he had done. It was the elephant in the room. He’d not even said thank you or sorry to him. The words wouldn’t come out. But he’d bullied Sachin and Sachin had saved his life.

“You’re right, Sachin... you know, we need to keep fighting for this,” Aarav said, suddenly an idea had come to him. “Why don’t we ask the fire brigade to come and speak to the Residents’ Association? If they won’t listen to us, maybe they’ll listen to them?”

Sachin smiled. It was a great idea. “Yes...yes!” he said.



Chapter 12

Knowing they didn't have much time before the building plans were fixed, the boys went down to the fire station almost immediately to ask for help.

The Residents' Association was meeting almost every day to ensure plans were fixed and the building rebuilt as soon as possible so that everyone could get back to 'normal life'. Thinking that the boys had had their say, the committee was surprised to find a request from the boys for another slot at their meeting the following day.

"Come in, come in boys," said Rahul uncle, holding the door open and motioning for the boys to come in. He was surprised to see two firefighters walk in behind them.

“Oh erm, hello...” said Rahul uncle, “Please, take a seat.” He saw Suresh roll his eyes in his chair in the corner of the room. The firefighters sat down as did Aarav and Sachin. Everyone was rather quiet.

“So boys, what did you want to talk to us about?” asked Rahul.

“Well, we still think our new building should be fire safe and we are not giving up until we make sure it is,” said Sachin, sounding more confident than he was.

“But we’ve been through this...” said Rahul.

“These firefighters know about fire safety better than all of us,” added Aarav, “Please just listen to them.”

“Actually, we are not going to say much,” said one of the firefighters. “Please put this on,” he added, handing over a memory stick. “It’s a video, please play it.”

Rahul took the memory stick. Suresh was tapping his hands on the table, clearly impatient to move on to other things but he kept quiet.

The video started playing on a screen. It was a shaky video, probably shot on a camera phone. As the picture came into focus, a raging house fire could clearly be seen. Screams could be heard. Two dark silhouettes could be made out in a top floor window: the source of the screams. The image switched abruptly to a tall building, a hotel maybe, more screaming, more flames. Again a new scene appeared, and again, and again.

“What is this? Some movie you’re making?” asked Suresh uncle.

One of the firefighters looked at Suresh and the rest of the committee. He stood up, walked over to Rahul’s laptop and turned off the video.

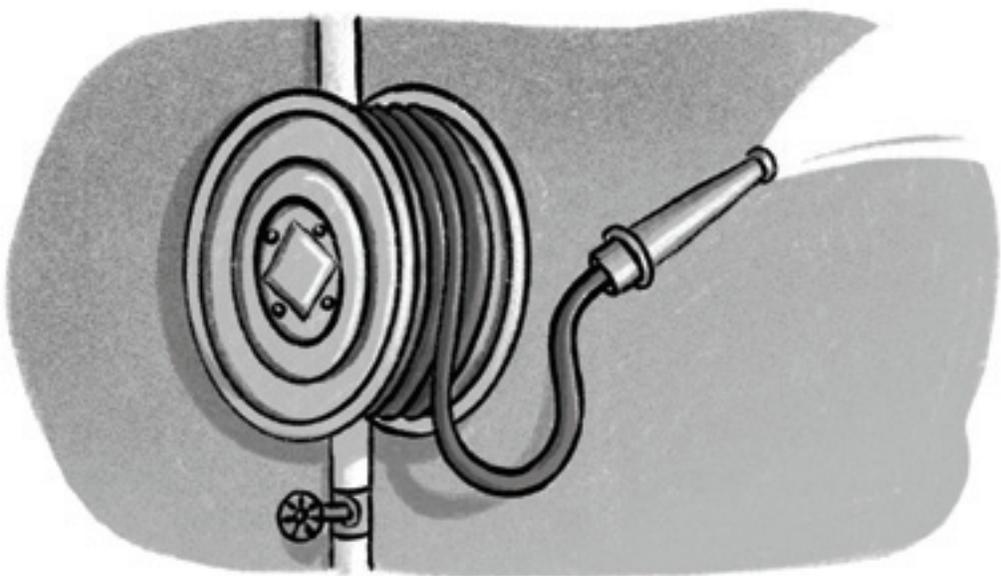
“No, it’s not,” he said.

“It’s not a movie, it’s real. These are real videos. And all of these people, all of those screams you heard, all the screams eventually stopped. Stopped...because all of those people, they died.”

The room was silent.

“Nearly 60 people die in fires every day in India,” said the firefighter.

“Ensuring a building is fire-safe is relatively easy. If you do this, you could be saving someone’s life—like Sachin saved all of yours.”



Chapter 13

There had been silence after the firefighter had finished speaking, except a small thank you from Rahul uncle as the boys and the firefighters left the meeting.

After thanking the firefighters themselves, Aarav and Sachin sat down on the same bench they had the previous day. They were both frustrated but neither said a word. Aarav knew what it felt like to be stuck in a fire and Sachin had seen the fear first hand. It bonded them yet there was still distance between them.

“I don’t know what else we can do, Sachin, I’m gonna go...” began Aarav, getting up off the bench. Sachin didn’t know what to say to stop him. He also didn’t know what else they could do.

Just then, Rahul uncle came out of the hall and walked towards the boys.

“I’m glad you haven’t gone, boys. You know, we’ve thought about what

you've said...about what the fire brigade have shown us," Rahul uncle said. "We're going to look over the budget again with fire safety in mind. We will put together some different options which we can vote on."

Aarav and Sachin looked at Rahul uncle, stunned.

Do you think the fire brigade will help advise us on these things you've brought to our attention?"

"Yes!" said the boys. Their stunned looks changed to smiles.

"I'm not guaranteeing anything but let's put some options together. You can help us, boys!"

The boys looked at each other and, for the first time since the fire, they smiled at each other.

"Just one thing, uncle," said Aarav, as they were walking back into the hall. "Who will get to vote on these options?"

"Everyone who lives in the apartment, I think, adults and children..." said Rahul uncle.

Sachin and Aarav couldn't believe their ears.

"You were right, Aarav. Sachin really did save our lives and if we do this properly, we might also save someone's life," added Rahul uncle.

The boys were both grinning as they followed Rahul uncle back into the hall.



Chapter 14

Within six months Bridgestone Court had been rebuilt. There'd been an almost unanimous vote to cover all the aspects of fire safety in the building. The new leisure facilities had been put on hold.

A few days after everyone had moved back in, the fire brigade came to Bridgestone Court to talk about fire safety. They spoke about how to prevent fires from breaking out and what to do should a fire break out. There had been a huge buzz of excitement at the chance to use a fire extinguisher on a controlled fire.

"While everyone is drying off," began one of the firefighters, laughing about the small water fight which had broken out after using the extinguishers, "I want to mention something else." His voice grew more serious now as the chatter in the room died down.

"I want to bring to your attention two amazing young men who you have living here in your apartment block. Sachin and Aarav, please come up here to the front," continued the firefighter.

Sachin and Aarav looked at each other, a little confused, but they got up

and walked up to the front of the hall and stood by the firefighters.

“These two young men are incredibly courageous. Firstly, because Aarav was trapped in the fire and Sachin showed amazing character to stay calm and help him out of the burning building.” Sachin was blushing and Aarav was staring at the floor.

“However,” continued the firefighter, “they were courageous in another way. In a way you may not know about. These two boys have fought hard to ensure your building is now fire safe. They stood up for what they believed in—the on-going safety of their community. They came to us at the fire station to ask for our help to convince the Residents’ Association to think again about how they allocated the funds for the reconstruction. Though they’re only teenagers, Sachin and Aarav are active citizens. They have made a real difference to your community.”

The residents were all listening, silently taking in what the firefighter was saying. One or two residents were looking at each other, nodding in agreement with the firefighter. Then slowly, applause broke out. Loud applause for the two boys. Sachin was still blushing as his sister ran over to him and gave him a big hug, eyes proudly looking up at her big brother. Aarav’s head was still lowered, eyes directed at the floor but slowly he turned to look at Sachin and his sister and he smiled to himself.

As the residents started dispersing, one of the firefighters asked for everyone’s attention. Before the session was over, there was one final thing he wanted the residents to do. The firefighters had handed out blindfolds for everyone to keep.

“Put it on at home,” explained one of the firefighters. “Then imagine a fire has broken out and there’s smoke everywhere. You can’t see anything. Get down on the floor, on all fours. Then try and make your way out of your apartment.”

There had been laughter and amusement as the residents disbanded after the session. But the seriousness of the exercise was not lost on anyone.

Misha and Sachin were walking out of the hall when Aarav approached them.

“Hey Sachin, hi Misha... Sachin, do you want to come and try this out with me upstairs? This exercise with the blindfold.”

Misha looked up at Sachin and back at Aarav. She was still not sure about Aarav. She hung close to Sachin, trying to protect him. She thought this was Aarav back to his old tricks, trying to concoct some way to make fun of Sachin.

“Er, yeah...sure, why not,” Sachin said, giving Misha a reassuring look.

“You can come too, Misha,” said Aarav. Misha nodded and strode along with the boys.

“Let’s do it in my apartment,” said Aarav as they climbed up the stairs.

When they were inside, Aarav took out his blindfold and handed it over to Sachin. “Go on, you first. Start from the kitchen and then try and crawl out to the front door.”

“Erm, OK then...” said Sachin a little hesitantly now. Aarav seemed far too keen for him to do this. Misha was moving her weight from one leg to the other nervously, wondering if something unpleasant was going to happen. She’d also picked up on Aarav’s unnerving enthusiasm for this exercise.

Sachin took a good look around the living room, memorising where

everything was, the tables, chairs, sofa, cabinet, and decided to take on the challenge none the less. After looking the kitchen up and down too, Sachin went to the far end and got down on his hands and knees. He started crawling forwards slowly. Every so often he put his weight back and used his hands to feel for things around him. The kitchen cupboards, the dustbins, the kitchen door, a slightly raised step into the living room. Sachin was worried he was going to bang his head or if Aarav was going to trick him in some way. He continued crawling and navigating himself through the living room. He whacked his hand on the side of the sofa but continued on.

Suddenly, Misha started giggling. She was meant to stay silent, and despite the tension of being with Aarav, the sight of her brother crawling around on the floor blindfolded sent her into hysterics. She looked over to Aarav to see he was also smiling.

Sachin stopped in his tracks. “Missshhaaaaa! Why are you laughing? Come on! Give me a break!” But Sachin’s voice was also cracking into a laugh. Suddenly, all three of them were laughing loudly.

“Come on, come on, finish up Sachin! You’re nearly at the front door,” said Aarav.

“OK..ufff, it’s hard work crawling you know!”

“I know, Sachin!” Aarav said, half laughing but half serious. He was suddenly taken back to the day of the fire. He’d crawled along his parents’ bedroom floor through the smoke. It had been awful. He’d been terrified.

“Yeah, I know Aarav, sorry,” said Sachin bumping his head slightly on the door handle as he stood up to open the door and finish the challenge.

“Oof,” said Aarav in sympathy to the bump. “It’s OK, Sachin. You know...

it's me who's sorry.”

Sachin and Misha both went quiet. Although he was wearing a blindfold, Sachin turned to where he thought Aarav was standing.

“I'm sorry for what I put you through. I was really horrible to you...and then, well, then you saved my life,” Aarav was looking back at Sachin who slowly removed his blindfold.

“I know I haven't said it before. I've not known how to. But thank you. It always just felt like thank you wasn't enough.”

The two boys were standing across the living room from each other in silence. Sachin looked down to the floor and then back up to Aarav.

“It's OK, Aarav, it's OK...” said Sachin.

Aarav smiled a little. He was still rooted to the spot. There was a long silence while they all reflected on Aarav's apology. Then Aarav spoke again.

“Open the door Sachin, you get a prize for completing the challenge...and well, for everything,” he said softly.

“Huh, what do you mean?” asked Sachin.

“Just open the door.”

Sachin opened the door and there, lying on the floor, was a large, oddly shaped parcel, wrapped nicely in bright green wrapping paper. Sachin picked it up.

“Open it, Sachin,” said Aarav, “It's for you.”

Aarav walked slowly up to the door, as did Misha, as Sachin unwrapped the gift.

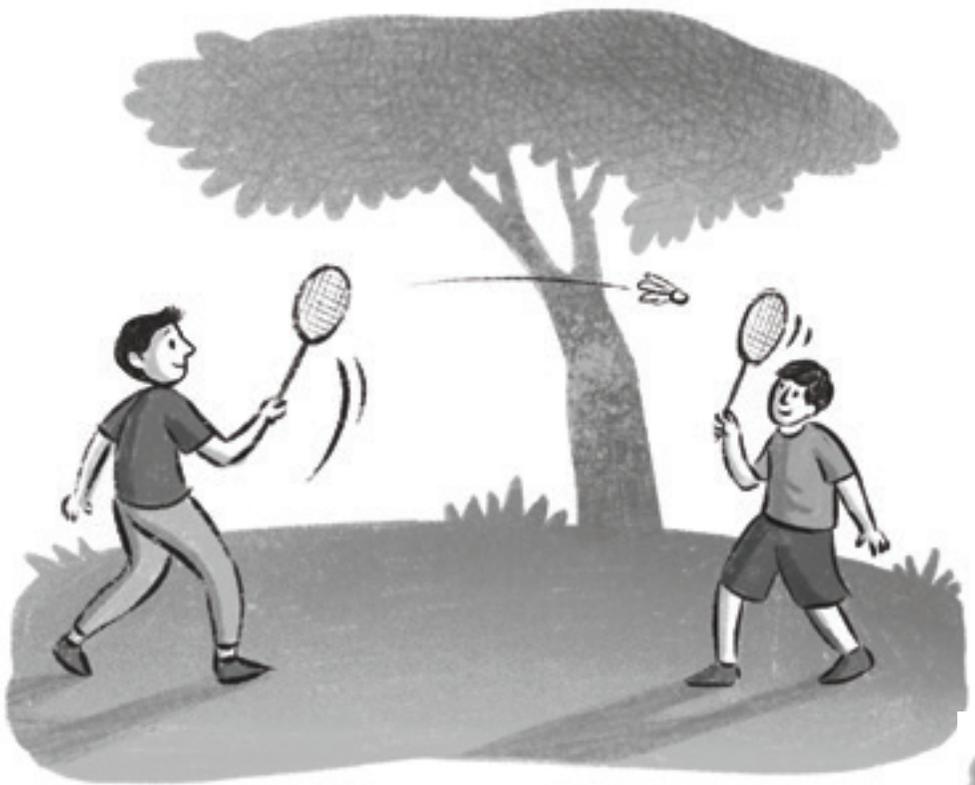
It was a brand new badminton racket.

“I saved up for it with my pocket money,” said Aarav. “It was the least I could do for you.”

Sachin was grinning. So was Misha. “Thank you, Aarav.” All the tension between the three had disappeared. Misha hugged her brother and threw a smile at Aarav. Aarav smiled back.

“Have you got a racket, Aarav?” asked Sachin. Aarav nodded.

“Go grab it then and let’s go and play!” said Sachin smiling. Grinning, Aarav ran off to get his racket, and then the three of them went downstairs to play badminton.



Sachin was an active citizen, helping to save Aarav from the burning building. Through his experience, Aarav also became an active citizen. Together, Sachin and Aarav took responsibility for issues in their apartment building and worked hard to ensure others understood the importance of what they were saying.

Aarav and Sachin worked with the fire brigade to educate the Residents' Association of their building about fire safety. They made sure their apartment building had all the necessary elements of fire safety incorporated when it was rebuilt after the fire. They are now much safer in case there is ever another fire.

Aarav and Sachin brought about a positive change in their community.

There are many ways you can be an active citizen.

Below is a pledge you can take to show your commitment to being an active citizen.



I.....take the Active Citizenship pledge.

I am a citizen of India.

I care about my responsibilities and my rights.

I care about my friends, family and my community.

I respect the rules of my city and my country.

I pledge to:

- Take care of my school, parks, playgrounds and other public spaces.
- Treat everyone with respect.
- Save water and electricity at home, school and wherever I go.
- Follow road safety and traffic rules.
- Segregate waste and always throw garbage in the dustbin.
- Use public transport.
- Minimise use of plastic materials.
- Spread the message of fire safety in my community.



About Janaagraha

Janaagraha (www.janaagraha.org) was founded by Swati Ramanathan and Ramesh Ramanathan in December 2001. It is registered under the Indian Trusts Act, 1882. Janaagraha's mission is to transform quality of life in India's cities and towns and it defines quality of life as comprising quality of infrastructure and services and quality of citizenship. We work with citizens to catalyze active citizenship in city neighbourhoods and with governments to institute reforms to city governance (what we call "city-systems"). Civic Learning, Civic Participation and Advocacy and Reforms are Janaagraha's three major strands of work to accomplish its mission.

Quality of Citizenship is an integral component of Quality of Life and therefore, Janaagraha's Civic Learning Program is aimed at catalyzing Active Citizenship in our cities. We firmly believe that systematic Civic Learning is a prerequisite for large-scale civic participation in our cities, whereby citizens will take ownership of their neighborhoods and cities and work constructively with each other and their governments to solve civic problems. Good citizenship is about what citizens do, rather than who they are. As citizens, we can make our cities a better place to live in and improve our quality of life. In this process we become responsible, engaged and active citizens.

ichangemycity

IChangeMyCity is a Janaagraha initiative

Sachin is being bullied. Everywhere he turns, Aarav is there, calling him names and intimidating him. At school, at football practice and now also in the apartment building where they both live. Then one day, the tables are turned and it's Aarav who is under fire. A real fire.

As the fire spreads and the clock is ticking, only Sachin and his younger sister notice what's happening. Can they do something to help Aarav? Read on to find out what happens and how Sachin, Aarav and the other residents of Bridgestone Court respond to this terrible event.

