

The Music Room Key



Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18



Chapter 1: The Corridor Crew

The school's production is in five weeks, and the scenery is behind.

It is a good production this year, the kind mothers buy tickets for early. Tilla runs the paint crew - four girls, six flats, and a backdrop that is currently a white sheet with a horizon line and a prayer. They are good girls and fast painters, the kind who come in old shirts and stay till the brushes are clean. What they do not have is a room.

The gym is theirs on paper, Tuesday and Thursday after school. In practice, the dance elective has the gym until four-thirty, and setup eats another twenty minutes, and by the time the first roller is wet it is five.

So the crew has been painting in the back corridor, flats leaning on the lockers. On Tuesday, the janitor asked them to move - wet paint, passing shoulders. On Thursday, the office asked them to move - a visitor tour. Both times the request was polite and right. Both times, the crew lost half an hour to moving, and the backdrop gained a smear shaped like someone's elbow.

Then the janitor came back, kindly, with the real sentence: "Girls, this is the last time. Wet paint where students walk is not a gray area. The corridor is done for you."





Chapter 2: Two Hours a Week

Tilla is angry, and she lets the walk home be angry. Then she sits down and does the arithmetic, because anger is information but it is not a plan.

Six flats, one backdrop: forty-eight person-hours of work left, two coats counted, setup and cleanup counted, drying time free because drying needs no people. Painting has to be done in three weeks - week four the stage belongs to rehearsals, week five is the show. Two sessions a week, two hours each, four girls: sixteen person-hours a week on paper. The corridor moves cost them about four of those every week, a quarter gone, so even while the corridor was allowed, it really gave twelve. And as of today, the corridor is withdrawn - twelve is a memory, not an option.

Twelve a week for three weeks would have been thirty-six. They need forty-eight. The number does not care how nicely anyone asks; it only cares what the week actually holds.

She writes what she is tempted to do - complain to the girls, quit, storm into the office - and none of them moves the number. Underneath she writes the fourth option: ask for something specific that actually fixes it.

"What would fix it," she thinks to herself, "is not sympathy. It's a room with a door and all sixteen hours. So ask for that."





Chapter 3: The Ask, Built

Sosha finds her at her locker, still writing.

"You're going to Margalit," Sosha says.

"Tomorrow after davening," Tilla says. "Want to come?"

"And say what - 'we need a real room'? She's heard that from every crew since forever. The answer is 'there isn't one.'"

"Then I won't say that," Tilla says. She reads from the notebook.

"The problem is forty-eight person-hours of work left, three weeks to do it in, and the corridor used to give us twelve a week - and now it's withdrawn. The ask is the back half of the lunchroom, Tuesday and Thursday, four to six - it's empty then, the floor is tile, and we can put down the drop cloths from the storage closet. That's the whole ask. If she has something better, I want to hear it."

"Huh," says Sosha. "That's not 'we need a real room.' That's a room."





Chapter 4: The Meeting

Morah Margalit teaches from a desk covered in other people's permission slips, and she listens the way directors listen - like she is already solving it.

Tilla gives it straight, the way she rehearsed. "We're going to miss the date or we're going to paint badly, and I don't want to do either.

Forty-eight person-hours of work left, three weeks, and the corridor used to give us twelve a week - and now it's withdrawn. I checked: the back half of the lunchroom is empty Tuesday and Thursday from four to six. Tile floor, we bring drop cloths, we clean like the kitchen was never there. Can the crew have it?"

Morah Margalit does not say yes.

"The lunchroom, no," she says, and she says why, which Tilla appreciates even while it stings. "The kitchen rules are the kitchen's, not mine, and paint near a serving kitchen is a fight I will lose before I start."

Tilla's stomach drops, and she lets it. The ask was specific, and the no is specific - aimed at the lunchroom, not at the crew. So she asks the question the no leaves standing. "Okay. What would work?"

"Now that," says Morah Margalit, "is the question with a future. You're right about the number, and there's a room I think you haven't checked, because everyone forgot it exists."





Chapter 5: The Alternative

The music room.

The choir moved to the auditorium in September, and the old music room off the stage lobby has been a lost-and-found with a sheet-draped piano in it ever since. Morah Margalit walks them there herself, between periods, and unlocks it with a key from a ring of twenty.

"Monday and Wednesday, four to six," she says. "Not Tuesday and Thursday - the dance elective's pianist uses it then, and she was here first. The floor is wood, so your drop cloths aren't a courtesy, they're the deal. Same water-based stage paint the school always uses - and the office signs off on the room for painting before you open a can: materials, ventilation, the window, an adult who knows you're in there. That's mine to arrange, not yours to assume. The flats lie flat along the back wall - nothing standing, nothing to tip - and nothing touches the piano, not a brush, not a sleeve. I unlock and I lock, and I check the room myself after your first week. That means a crew list on the door with a name responsible each day."





Tilla looks at Sosha. Sosha is looking at the wall space like she is already hanging the backdrop on it.

It is not what she asked. Monday and Wednesday instead of Tuesday and Thursday means tutor questions for two of the girls - theirs to answer, not hers - and the wood floor means a second drop cloth, which means a budget talk with the production's money girl. It is also a room with a door that locks, and all sixteen hours.

Tilla does the fit-check out loud, because a bad yes is worse than an honest no. "If the tutors can't move, this room is a corridor with a piano. Can we try it for one week? If the schedule doesn't hold or the floor suffers, we end the trial and I come back to you with the number still standing - and we make a new plan together."

"One week," Morah Margalit agrees. "Two sessions. Then I look at the floor and the calendar with you, and we decide from evidence."





Chapter 6: The Next Step, Named

They shake on one week, and then Tilla does the part that makes an agreement real instead of pleasant.

"I'll post the crew list on the door today - my name Mondays, Sosha's Wednesdays. Drop cloths down before paint opens, every time, no exceptions even for five minutes. The tutor questions belong to the girls - they ask their tutors and their mothers tonight and tell me by Sunday. If the schedule can't hold, I don't start short - I come back to you before Monday, and we make a new plan together, maybe a smaller backdrop, because a week late is a week we don't have. If the plan holds, you look at the floor and the calendar after Wednesday's session, two sessions in, and we decide. If it doesn't, the new plan gets its own review, whenever we set it."

"That's what I said," Morah Margalit says, amused.

"I know," Tilla says. "Now it's said twice, by both of us, with names on it."

She writes it in the notebook on the spot, and Morah Margalit initials the page - not because either of them distrusts the other, but because the production has five weeks and no room for two different memories of one conversation.





Chapter 7: The Week of Evidence

The answers come back by Sunday, the honest way: one girl's Wednesday tutor moves to Tuesday, after she and her mother ask; the other's Monday conflict at home settles the same way. All four girls make every session, full hours - which the calendar needs, because three weeks at sixteen person-hours leaves no slack for anyone missing.

The crew learns the room in one session. The flats lie flat along the back wall, the window open, the drop cloths taped. The piano stays under its sheet, untouched, exactly as promised - the paint shirts live on the door hook. The backdrop, pinned flat for the first time in its life, gets its sky in two coats, and the sky is good.

On Wednesday, Morah Margalit comes at six and looks at the floor first, because she said she would. The drop cloths are down, edges taped the way Tilla's father tapes them at home. The floor is clean. She looks at the calendar second: the crew is ahead of the number for the first time all production.

"The room is yours through the show," she says. "Same rules. And Tilla - next year I'm putting the paint crew in here from day one, and telling everyone it was my idea."

"Fair," says Tilla. "We'll tell everyone you had help."





Chapter 8: The Sheet and the Sky

Opening night, the backdrop hangs with its good sky, and nobody in the audience knows about the corridor, the lunchroom, or the music room key, which is exactly how scenery wants it.

Backstage, Sosha says, "Remember when the answer was 'there isn't one'?"

"The answer was 'not that one,'" Tilla says. "There's a difference, and the difference is the whole job of asking."

After the show, the crew washes the brushes and folds the drop cloths, and Tilla tapes the crew list to the inside of the music room door for the next crew to find, with one line under her name: the room works if the rules work.

Then Morah Margalit locks the room for the last time that year, the key goes back on its ring of twenty, and the production is over, and the sky stays.

