

A large, ornate, white decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns frames the top and sides of the page. The border is set against a light gray background.

tiger's curse

by COLLEEN HOUCK



SPLINTER

New York

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Sanskrit lettering by Hema Pendikatla.

Designed by Katrina Damkoehler.

*For the Lindas in my life.
One gave me the motivation to write
and the other gave me the time.
Both I call sister.*



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the tiger

by William Blake

*Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

*In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?*

*And what shoulder and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand and what dread feet?*

*What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?*

*When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?*

*Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

PROLOGUE



the curse

The prisoner stood with his hands tied in front of him, tired, beaten, and filthy but with a proud back befitting his royal Indian heritage. His captor, Lokesh, looked on haughtily from a lavishly carved, gilded throne. Tall, white pillars stood like sentinels around the room. Not a whisper of a jungle breeze moved across the sheer draperies. All the prisoner could hear was the steady clinking of Lokesh's jeweled rings against the side of the golden chair. Lokesh looked down, eyes narrowed into contemptuous, triumphant slits.

The prisoner was the prince of an Indian kingdom called Mujulaain. Technically, his current title was *Prince and High Protector of the Mujulaain Empire*, but he still preferred to think of himself as just his father's son.

That Lokesh, the raja of a small neighboring kingdom called Bhreenam, had managed to kidnap the prince was not as shocking as who was sitting beside Lokesh: Yesubai, the raja's daughter and the prisoner's fiancée, and the prince's younger brother, Kishan. The captive studied all three of them but only Lokesh returned his determined gaze. Beneath his shirt, the prince's stone amulet lay cool against his skin, while anger surged through his body.

The prisoner spoke first, struggling to keep the betrayal out of his

voice, "Why have you—my soon-to-be-father—treated me with such . . . *inhospitality*?"

Nonchalant, Lokesh affixed a deliberate smile on his face. "My dear prince, you have something I desire."

"*Nothing* you could want can justify this. Are our kingdoms not to be joined? Everything I have has been at your disposal. You needed only to ask. Why have you done this?"

Lokesh rubbed his jaw as his eyes glittered. "Plans change. It seems that your brother would like to take my daughter for *his* bride. He has promised me certain remunerations if I help him achieve that goal."

The prince turned his attention to Yesubai, who, with cheeks aflame, assumed a demure, submissive pose with her head bowed. His arranged marriage to Yesubai was supposed to have ushered in an era of peace between the two kingdoms. He had been away for the last four months overseeing military operations on the far side of the empire and had left his brother to watch over the kingdom.

I guess Kishan was watching a little bit more than just the kingdom.

The prisoner strode fearlessly forward, faced Lokesh, and called out, "You have fooled us all. You are like a coiled cobra that has been hiding in his basket, waiting for the moment to strike."

He widened his glance to include his brother and his fiancée. "Don't you see? Your actions have freed the viper, and we are bitten. His poison now runs through our blood, destroying everything."

Lokesh laughed disdainfully and spoke, "If you agree to surrender your piece of the Damon Amulet, I might be persuaded to allow you to live."

"To live? I thought we were bartering for my bride."

"I'm afraid your rights as a betrothed husband have been usurped. Perhaps I haven't been clear. Your brother will have Yesubai."



The prisoner clenched his jaw, and said simply, “My father’s armies would destroy you if you killed me.”

Lokesh laughed. “He certainly would not destroy Kishan’s new family. We will simply placate your dear father and tell him that you were the victim of an unfortunate accident.”

He stroked his short, stippled beard and then clarified, “Of course, you understand, that even should I allow you live, I will rule *both* kingdoms.” Lokesh smiled. “If you defy me I will forcibly remove your piece of the amulet.”

Kishan leaned toward Lokesh and protested stiffly, “I thought we had an arrangement. I only brought my brother to you because you swore that you would *not* kill him! You were to take the amulet. That’s all.”

Lokesh shot out his hand as quickly as a snake and grabbed Kishan’s wrist. “You should have learned by now that I *take* whatever I want. If you would prefer the view from where your brother is standing, I would be happy to accommodate you.”

Kishan shifted in his chair but kept silent.

Lokesh continued. “No? Very well, I have now amended our former arrangement. Your brother *will* be killed if he does not comply with my wishes, and *you* will never marry my daughter unless you hand over your piece of the amulet to me as well. This private arrangement of ours can easily be revoked, and I can have Yesubai married to a different man—a man of *my* choosing. Perhaps an old sultan would cool her blood. If you want to remain close to Yesubai, you will learn to be submissive.”

Lokesh squeezed Kishan’s wrist until it cracked loudly. Kishan didn’t react at all.

Flexing his fingers and slowly rolling his wrist, Kishan sat back, raised a hand to touch the engraved amulet piece hidden underneath his own shirt, and made eye contact with his brother. An unspoken message passed between them.

The brothers would deal with each other later, but Lokesh's actions meant war, and the needs of the kingdom were a priority for both.

Obsession pumped up Lokesh's neck, throbbed at his temple, and settled behind his black, serpentine eyes. Those same eyes dissected the prisoner's face, probing, assessing for weakness. Angered to the point of action, Lokesh jumped to his feet. "So be it!"

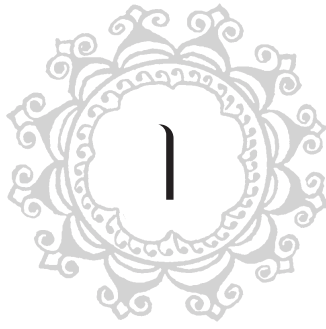
Lokesh pulled a shiny knife with a jeweled hilt from his robe and roughly yanked up the sleeve of the prisoner's now filthy, once-white Jodhpuri coat. The ropes twisted on his wrists and he grunted in pain as Lokesh drew the knife across his arm. The cut was deep enough that blood welled up, spilled over the edge, and dripped onto the tiled floor.

Lokesh tore a wooden talisman from around his neck and placed it beneath the prisoner's arm. Blood dripped from the knife onto the charm, and the engraved symbol glowed a fiery red before pulsing an unnatural white light.

The light shot toward the prince with groping fingers that pierced his chest and clawed its way through his body. Though strong, he wasn't prepared for the pain. The captive screamed as his body suddenly became inflamed with a prickly heat and he fell to the floor.

He reached out with his hands to brace himself, but he managed only to scratch feebly on the cold, white tile of the floor. The prince watched helplessly as both Yesubai and his brother attacked Lokesh, who shoved both back viciously. Yesubai fell to the ground, hitting her head hard on the dais. The prince was aware that his brother was near, overtaken by grief as the life drained from Yesubai's limp body. Then he was aware of nothing except the pain.





Kelsey

I was standing on a precipice. Technically, I was just standing in line at a temp job office in Oregon, but it felt like a precipice. Childhood, high school, and the illusion that life was good and times were easy were behind me. Ahead loomed the future: college, a variety of summer jobs to help pay for tuition, and the probability of a lonely adulthood.

The line inched forward. I'd been waiting for what seemed like hours trying to get a lead on a summer job. When it was finally my turn, I approached the desk of a bored, tired job placement worker who was on the phone. The woman gestured me closer and indicated that I should sit down. After she hung up, I handed her some forms and she mechanically began the interview.

"Name, please."

"Kelsey. Kelsey Hayes."

"Age?"

"Seventeen, almost eighteen. My birthday's coming soon."

She stamped the forms. "Are you a high school graduate?"

"Yes. I graduated just a couple of weeks ago. I plan on attending Chemeketa this fall."

"Parents' names?"

"Madison and Joshua Hayes, but my guardians are Sarah and Michael Neilson."

“Guardians?”

Here we go again, I thought. Somehow explaining my life never got easier.

“Yes. My parents are . . . deceased. They died in a car accident when I was a freshman.”

She bent over some paperwork and scribbled for a long time. I grimaced, wondering what she could be writing that was taking so long.

“Miss Hayes, do you like animals?”

“Sure. Umm, I know how to feed them . . .” *Is anyone lamer than me? Way to talk myself out of being hired.* I cleared my throat. “I mean, sure, I love animals.”

The woman didn’t really seem to care about my response, and she handed me a posting for a job.

NEEDED:
A TEMPORARY WORKER FOR TWO WEEKS ONLY
**DUTIES INCLUDE: TICKET SALES,
FEEDING THE ANIMALS, AND
CLEANING UP AFTER PERFORMANCES.**

**Note: Because the tiger and dogs
need to be cared for 24/7, room and board
are provided.**

The job was for the Circus Maurizio, a small family-run circus at the fairgrounds. I remembered getting a coupon for it at the grocery store and I’d even considered offering to take my foster parents’ kids, Rebecca, who is six years old, and Samuel, who is four, so that Sarah and Mike could have some time to themselves. But then I lost the coupon and forgot all about it.

“So, do you want the job or what?” the woman asked impatiently.

“A tiger, huh? Sounds interesting! Are there elephants, too? Because I have to draw the line at scooping up elephant droppings.” I giggled quietly at my own joke, but the woman didn’t so much as crack a smile. Since I had no other options, I told her that I would do it. She gave me a card with an address and she instructed me to be there the next day by 6:00 a.m.

I wrinkled my nose. “They need me at six in the morning?”

The worker just gave me a look and shouted “Next!” at the line shuffling behind me.

What had I gotten myself into? I thought as I climbed into Sarah’s borrowed hybrid and headed home. I sighed. *It could be worse. I could be flipping burgers tomorrow. Circuses are fun. I just hope there are no elephants.*

Living with Sarah and Mike was okay for the most part. They gave me a lot more freedom than most other kids’ parents, and I think we have a healthy respect for each other—well, as least as much as adults can respect a seventeen-year-old anyway. I helped babysit their kids and never got into trouble. It wasn’t the same as being with my parents, but we were still a family of sorts.

I parked the car carefully in the garage and headed into the house to find Sarah attacking a mixing bowl with a wooden spoon. I dropped my bag on a chair and went to get a glass of water.

“Making vegan cookies again, I see. What’s the special occasion?” I asked.

Sarah jammed the wooden spoon into the dense dough several times as if the spoon were an icepick. “It’s Sammy’s turn to bring treats for his playdate.”

I stifled a snigger by coughing.

She narrowed her eyes at me shrewdly. “Kelsey Hayes, just because your mother was the best cookie baker in world doesn’t mean I can’t make a decent treat.”

"It's not your skills I doubt, it's your ingredients," I said, picking up a jar. "Substitute nut butter, flax, protein powder, and agave. I'm surprised you don't put recycled paper in those things. Where's the chocolate?"

"I use carob sometimes."

"*Carob* is not chocolate. It tastes like brown chalk. If you're going to make cookies, you should make—"

"I know. I know. Pumpkin chocolate chip or double chocolate peanut butters. They're really bad for you, Kelsey," she said with a sigh.

"But they taste *so* good."

I watched Sarah lick a finger and continued. "By the way, I got a job. I'm going to be cleaning up and feeding animals at a circus. It's at the fairgrounds."

"Good for you! That sounds like it will be a great experience," Sarah perked up. "What kind of animals?"

"Uh, dogs mostly. And I think there's a tiger. But I probably won't have to do anything dangerous. I'm sure they have professional tiger people for that stuff. But I do have to start really early and will be sleeping there for the next two weeks."

"Hmmm," Sarah paused contemplatively. "Well we're just a phone call away if you need us. Would you mind taking the brussels sprouts casserole a la 'recycled newspaper' out of the oven?"

I set the stinky casserole in the center of the table while she popped her cookie sheets in the oven and called the kids to dinner. Mike came in, set down his briefcase, and kissed his wife on the cheek.

"What's that . . . smell?" he asked suspiciously.

"Brussels sprouts casserole," I answered.

"And I made cookies for Sammy's playgroup," Sarah announced proudly. "I'll save the best one for you."

Mike shot me a knowing look that Sarah caught. She snapped her dishtowel at his thigh.

“If that’s the attitude you and Kelsey are bringing to the table then the two of you get cleanup duty tonight.”

“Aw, honey. Don’t be mad.” He kissed Sarah again and wrapped his arms around her, trying his best to get out of the task.

I took that as my cue to exit. As I snuck out of the kitchen, I heard Sarah giggle.

Someday, I’d like a guy to try and talk himself out of cleanup duty with me in the same way, I thought and smiled.

Apparently, Mike negotiated well because he got put-the-kids-to-bed duty instead of cleanup, while I was left to do dishes on my own. I didn’t mind really but as soon as I was done, I decided it was my bedtime too. Six o’clock in the morning was going to come awfully early.

Quietly, I climbed the stairs to my bedroom. It was small and cozy, with just a simple bed, a mirrored dresser, a desk for my computer and homework, a closet, my clothes, my books, a basket of different colored hair ribbons, and my grandmother’s quilt.

My grandmother made that quilt when I was little. I was very young, but I remember her stitching it together, the same metal thimble always on her finger. I traced a butterfly on the worn-out, raggedy-at-the-corners quilt, remembering how I had snuck the thimble out of her sewing kit one night just to feel her near me. Even though I was a teenager, I still slept with the quilt every night.

I changed into my pajamas, shook my hair free from its braid, and brushed it out, flashing back to how mom used to do it for me while we talked.

Crawling under my warm covers, I set my alarm for, *ugh*, 4:30 a.m. and wondered what I could possibly be doing with a tiger so early in the

morning and how I would survive the three-ring circus that was already my life. My stomach growled.

I glanced at my nightstand and the two pictures I kept out. One picture was of the three of us: Mom, Dad, and me at a New Year's celebration. I had just turned twelve. My long brown hair had been curled but in the picture it drooped because I'd thrown a fit about using hairspray. I'd smiled in the shot, despite the fact that I had a gleaming row of silver braces. I was grateful for my straight white teeth now, but I'd absolutely hated those braces back then.

I touched the glass, placing my thumb briefly over the image of my pale face. I'd always longed to be svelte, tan, blond, and blue eyed but I had the same brown eyes as my father and the tendency toward chubbiness of my mother.

The other was a candid shot of my parents at their wedding. There was a beautiful water fountain in the background, and they were young, happy, and smiling at each other. I wanted that for myself someday. I wanted someone to look at me like that.

Flopping over on my stomach and stuffing my pillow under my cheek, I drifted off thinking about my mom's cookies.

That night, I dreamed I was being chased through the jungle, and when I turned to look at my pursuer, I was startled to see a large tiger. My dream self laughed and smiled and then turned and ran faster. The sound of gentle, padded paws raced along after me, beating in time with my heart.





the circus

My alarm startled me out of a deep sleep at 4:30 in the morning. It would be warm outside today, but not *too* hot. Oregon almost never got too hot. An Oregon governor must have passed a law a long, long time ago that said Oregon had to always have moderate temperatures.

It was dawn. The sun still hadn't climbed over the mountains, but the sky was already brightening, changing the clouds to pink cotton candy in the eastern horizon. It must have drizzled rain last night because I could smell an appealing fragrance in the air—the scent of wet grass and pine mingled together.

I hopped out of bed, turned on the shower, waited till the bathroom turned good and steamy, and then jumped in and let the hot water pound my back to wake up my sleepy muscles.

What exactly does one wear to a circus job? Not knowing what was appropriate, I tugged on a short-sleeved T-shirt and a good pair of work jeans. Then, I slipped my feet into tennis shoes, toweled dry my hair, and wove it into a quick French braid that I tied off with a blue ribbon. Next, I applied some lip gloss, and voilà, my circus primping was complete.

Time to pack. I figured I wouldn't need to bring much, just a couple of things to make me comfortable since I would only be at the circus for two weeks and could always make a pit stop at home. I rifled through

my closet and selected three outfits, which were organized by color and hung neatly, before pulling open my dresser drawers. I grabbed a few sock balls, which were also meticulously arranged by color, and shoved everything into my trusty school backpack. Then I stuffed in some pens and pencils, a few books, my journal, some toiletries, my wallet, and the pictures of my family. I rolled up my quilt, stuffed it in the top, and jiggled the zipper until it shut.

Slinging my backpack over my shoulder, I headed downstairs. Sarah and Mike were already awake and eating breakfast. They woke up insanely early every day to go *running*. That was just crazy, and at 5:30 a.m. they were already done.

I mumbled, "Hey, good morning, guys."

Mike said, "Hey, good morning back. So, are you ready to start the new job?"

"Yeah. I get to sell tickets and hang around a tiger for two weeks. Great, huh?"

He chuckled. "Yep, sounds pretty great. More interesting than Public Works anyway. Want a lift? I drive right past the fairgrounds on my way into town."

I smiled at him. "Sure. Thanks, Mike. I'd love a ride," I replied.

Promising to call Sarah every few days, I grabbed a granola bar, quickly forced myself to gulp down half a glass of their soy milk—barely containing my gag reflex—and headed out the door with Mike.

At the fairgrounds, a big, blue sign posted on the street advertised upcoming events. A large slick banner read

POLK COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS
WELCOMES THE
CIRCUS MAURIZIO
FEATURING THE MAURIZIO ACROBATS
AND THE FAMOUS DHIREN!

Here we go. I sighed and started walking along the gravel path toward the main building. The central complex looked like a large airplane or military bunker. The paint was cracked and peeling in places, and the windows needed to be washed. A large American flag snapped and rolled in the breeze as the chain it was attached to clinked softly against the metal flagpole.

The fairground was an odd cluster of old buildings, a small parking lot, and a dirt path that wound between everything and around the border of the grounds. A pair of long, flatbed trucks were parked alongside several white canvas tents. Circus posters hung everywhere; there was at least one large poster on every building. Some featured acrobats. Some had pictures of jugglers.

I didn't see any elephants and breathed a sigh of relief. *If there had been elephants here, I probably would have smelled them already.*

A torn poster fluttered in the breeze. I caught the edge and smoothed it out against the post. It was a picture of a white tiger. *Well, hello there!* I thought. *I hope they have just one of you . . . and that you don't particularly enjoy eating teenage girls.*

Opening the door to the main building, I walked inside. The central hub had been converted into a one-ring circus. Tiers of faded red stadium chairs were stacked against the walls.

Chatting in the corner was a couple of people. A tall man, who looked like he was in charge, was off to the side, writing on a clipboard and inspecting boxes. I made a beeline for him across the black springy floor and introduced myself, "Hi, my name's Kelsey, your two-week temp."

He looked me up and down while chewing on something, and then spat on the floor. "Go around back, out those doors, and turn to your left. A black and silver motor home is parked out there."

"Thanks!" The tobacco spit disgusted me, but I managed to smile at him anyway. I made my way to the motor home and knocked on the door.

"Jus' a minute," a man's voice yelled. The door opened unexpectedly

fast, and I jumped back in surprise. A man in a dress robe towered over me, laughing heartily at my reaction. He was very tall, dwarfing my five-foot, seven-inch frame, and he had a rotund potbelly. Black, curly hair covered his scalp, but the hairline ended just a little bit past where it should be. Smiling at me, he reached up to shift his hairpiece back into place. A thin black mustache with both ends waxed to thin points stuck straight out from either side of his upper lip. He also had a tiny square goatee patch on his chin.

"Don't be-a intimidated at my appearance," he insisted.

I dropped my eyes and flushed. "I'm not intimidated. It just seems I caught you by surprise. I'm sorry if I woke you."

He laughed. "I like de surprises. It keeps me-a young and a most handsome man."

I giggled but stopped quickly after remembering this was probably my new boss. Crow's feet surrounded his twinkling blue eyes. His skin was tan, which showed off his toothy, white smile. He seemed like the kind of man who's always laughing at a private joke.

In a booming theatrical voice, with a strong Italian accent, he asked, "And who might you be, young lady?"

I smiled nervously. "Hi. My name's Kelsey. I was hired to work here for a couple of weeks."

He leaned over to grasp my hand. His completely enfolded mine and he shook it up and down enthusiastically enough to make my teeth rattle. "Ah, *Fantastico!* How propitious! Welcome to the Circus Maurizio! We are a little, how you say, short-handed, and need some *assistenza* while we are in your *magnifica città*, eh? *Splendido* to have you! Let us get a started *immediatamente.*"

He glanced over at a cute young blonde girl about fourteen years old who was walking by. "Cathleen, take this *giovane donna* to Matt and *informare* him I *desideri*—that I wish him to work with her together. He's

incaricato to teach her today.” He turned again to me. “Nice to meet you, Kelsey. I hope you *piacere*, ah, *enjoy*, working here at our *piccola tenda di circo!*”

I said, “Thanks, it was nice to meet you too.”

He winked at me, then turned around, went back inside his motor home, and closed the door.

Cathleen smiled and led me around the back of the building to the circus’s sleeping quarters. “Welcome to the big—er, well, small top! Come on, follow me. You can sleep in my tent if you want. There are a couple of extra cots in there. My mom, my aunt, and I all share a tent. We travel with the circus. My mom’s an acrobat and my aunt is, too. Our tent’s nice, if you can ignore all the costumes.”

She led me into her tent and to a vacant cot. The tent was spacious. I stowed my backpack under an empty cot and looked around. She was right about the costumes. They were hanging everywhere—racks and racks of them. Lace, sparkles, feathers, and spandex covered every corner of the tent. There was also a lit mirrored table with makeup, hair-brushes, pins, and curlers strewn haphazardly over every square inch of the surface.

We then found Matt, who looked to be about fourteen or fifteen. He had brown hair, an average short haircut, brown eyes, and a happy-go-lucky grin. He was trying to set up a ticket stand by himself—and failing miserably.

“Hey, Matt,” Cathleen said as we grabbed the bottom of the booth to help him.

She was blushing. How cute.

Cathleen continued, “Um, this is Kelsey. She’s here for two weeks. You’re supposed to show her the ropes.”

“No problem,” he replied. “See ya around, Cath.”

“See ya.” She smiled and flounced away.

“So, Kelsey, I guess you get to be my sidekick today, huh? Well, you’ll love it,” he said, teasing me. “I run the tickets and souvenir booths, and I’m the trash collector and stock boy. I basically do everything around here that needs to get done. My dad’s the circus animal trainer.”

“That’s a cool job.” I replied and joked, “It’s sounds better than a trash collector anyway.”

Matt laughed. “Let’s get going then,” he said.

We spent the next few hours hauling boxes, stocking the concession stand, and preparing for the public.

Ugh, I’m out of shape, I thought as my biceps protested and tried to unionize against me.

Dad always used to say, “Hard work keeps you grounded” whenever Mom would come up with a massive new project like planting a flower garden. He was infinitely patient, and when I complained about the extra work, he’d just smile and say, “Kells, when you love someone, you learn to give and take. Someday that will happen to you too.”

Somehow, I doubted this was one of those situations.

When everything was ready, Matt sent me over to Cathleen to pick out and change into a circus costume—which turned out to be gold, glittery, and something I normally wouldn’t have touched with a ten-foot pole.

This job better be worth it, I muttered under my breath and crammed my head through the shiny neckline.

Donned in my new sparkly getup, I walked out to the ticket booth and saw that Matt had put up the price board. He was waiting for me with instructions, the lock box, and a ring of tickets. He had also brought me a sack lunch.

“It’s show time. Chow down quick because a couple of buses of summer camp kids are on their way.”

Before I could finish eating, the camp children descended upon me

in a raucous, violent flurry of little bodies. I felt like tiny buffalo were stampeding over me. My customer service-like smile probably looked more like a frightened grimace. There was nowhere for me to run. They were all around me—each one clamoring for my attention.

The adults approached, and I asked them hopefully, “Are you all paying together or separately?”

One of the teachers responded, “Oh, no. We decided to let each child buy a ticket.”

“That’s great,” I muttered with a fake smile.

I began selling the tickets, and Cathleen soon joined me until I heard the music of the performance begin. I sat there for about twenty minutes more, but nobody else came in, so I locked the money box and found Matt inside the tent watching the show.

The man I’d met earlier that morning was the ringleader. “What’s his name?” I whispered to Matt.

“Agostino Maurizio,” he replied. “He’s the owner of the circus, and the acrobats are all members of his family.”

Mr. Maurizio brought out the clowns, acrobats, and jugglers, and I found myself enjoying the performance. Before long, though, Matt elbowed me and motioned to the souvenir stand. Intermission was going to start soon: time to sell balloons.

Together we blew up dozens of multicolored balloons with a helium tank. The kids were in a frenzy! They ran to every booth and counted out their coins so they could spend every penny.

Red seemed to be the most popular balloon color. Matt took the money while I inflated the balloons. I’d never done it before, and I popped a few, which startled the kids, but I tried to make the loud pops into a joke by shouting, “Whoopsie!” every time it happened. Pretty soon, they were yelling, “Whoopsie!” along with me.

The music began again, and the kids quickly filed back to their

seats, clutching their assorted purchases. Several of the kids had bought glow-in-the-dark swords and were waving them around, threatening each other gleefully.

As we sat down, Matt's dad came into the ring to do his dog show. Then the clowns came out again and played various tricks on audience members. One threw a bucket of confetti over the kids.

Great! I probably get to sweep all that up.

Next, Mr. Maurizio came back out. Dramatic safari hunting music began, and the circus lights extinguished quickly, as if they had been mysteriously blown out. A spotlight found the announcer in the center of the ring. "And now . . . the highlight of our *programma*! He was taken from the harsh, wild *giungla*, the jungles, of India and brought here to America. He is a fierce hunter, a *cacciatore bianco*, who stalks his prey in the wild, waiting, watching for the right time, and then, he . . . *springs* into action! *Movimento!*"

While he was talking, men brought out a large, round cage. It was shaped like a giant upside-down bowl with a chain-link fence tunnel attached to one side. They set it in the middle of the ring and clamped locks onto metal rings embedded in cement blocks.

Mr. Maurizio continued. He roared into the microphone, and the kids all jumped in their seats. I laughed at Mr. Maurizio's theatrics. He was a good storyteller. He proclaimed, "This *tigre* is one of the most *pericoloso—dangerous—*predators in the entire world! Watch our trainer carefully as he risks his life to bring you . . . Dhiren!" He jerked his head toward the right, and then he ran out of the ring as the spotlight moved over to the canvas flaps at the end of the building. Two men had pulled out an old-fashioned animal wagon.

It looked like the kind of wagon on a box of animal crackers. It had a white, curvy gilt-edged top, big black wheels painted white around the edges, and ornamental carved spokes that were painted



gold. Black metal bars on both sides of the wagon curved in an arch at the top.

A ramp from the wagon door was attached to the chain-link tunnel, as Matt's dad entered the cage. He set up three stools on the side of the cage opposite from where he stood. He had changed into an impressive golden costume and brandished a short whip.

"Release the tiger!" he commanded.

The doors opened, and a man standing by the cage prodded the animal. I held my breath as an enormous white tiger emerged from the cage, trotted down the ramp, and into the chain-link tunnel. A moment later, it was in the big cage with Matt's father. The whip cracked, and the tiger jumped up onto a stool. Another crack and the tiger stood on its hind legs and pawed the air with its claws. The crowd erupted into applause.

The tiger leapt from stool to stool while Matt's father kept pulling the stools farther and farther away. On the last leap, I held my breath. I wasn't sure if the tiger would make it to the other stool, but Matt's father encouraged it. Gathering itself, it crouched low, assessed the distance carefully, and then leapt across the breach.

Its entire body was airborne for several seconds, with its legs stretched out ahead and behind. It was a magnificent animal. Reaching the stool with its front paws, it shifted its weight, and landed its back feet gracefully. Turning on the small stool, it rotated its large body with ease, and sat, facing its trainer.

I clapped for a long time, totally in awe of the great beast.

The tiger roared on command, stood on its hind legs, and batted its paws in the air. Matt's father shouted another command. The tiger jumped down from the stool and ran around the cage in a circle. The trainer circled as well, keeping his eyes centered on the animal. He kept the whip just behind the tiger's tail, encouraging it to keep moving.

Matt's dad gave a signal and a young man passed a large ring through the cage—a hoop. The tiger leapt through the hoop, then quickly turned around and jumped back through again and again.

The last thing the trainer did was put his head inside the tiger's mouth. A hush fell on the crowd and Matt stiffened. The tiger opened its mouth impossibly wide. I saw its sharp teeth and leaned forward feeling concerned. Matt's father slowly moved his head closer to the tiger. The tiger blinked a few times, but it held still, and its powerful jaws gaped even wider.

Matt's dad lowered his head all the way inside the animal's mouth, fully within the chomping area of the tiger's maw. Finally, he slowly brought his head out. When his head was completely free and he had moved away, the crowd erupted in cheers, while he bowed several times. Other handlers appeared to help take down the cage.

My eyes were drawn to the tiger, which was now sitting on one of the stools. I saw it moving its tongue around. It was scrunching up its face as if it smelled something funny. It almost looked like it was gagging, like a cat does when it has a hairball. Then it shook itself and sat there calmly.

Matt's dad brought his hands up, and the crowd cheered loudly. The whip cracked again, and the tiger quickly jumped off the stool, ran back through the tunnel, up the ramp, and into its cage. Matt's dad ran out of the ring and stepped behind the canvas curtain.

Mr. Maurizio dramatically shouted, "The Great Dhiren! *Mille grazie!* Thank you so much for coming to see the Circus Maurizio!"

As the tiger's cage was wheeled away before me, I had a sudden urge to stroke its head and comfort it. I wasn't sure if tigers could show emotion, but for some reason I felt like I could sense its mood. It seemed melancholy.

Just at that moment, a soft breeze wrapped around me carrying the



scent of night blooming jasmine and sandalwood. It completely overwhelmed the strong aroma of hot buttered popcorn and cotton candy. My heart beat faster as goosebumps shot down my arms. But as quickly as it came, the lovely scent disappeared and I felt an inexplicable hole in the pit of my stomach.

The lights came up and the kids started stampeding out of the arena. My brain was still slightly foggy. Slowly, I got up and turned around to stare at the curtain where the tiger had disappeared. A faint trace of sandalwood and an unsettled feeling lingered.

Hub! I must have hypersensitivity disorder.

The show was over, and I was officially crazy.



the tiger

The kids rushed out of the building in a screaming mob. A bus started up in the parking lot. As it noisily shook itself awake rumbling, hissing, and puffing air out of its exhaust pipe, Matt stood up and stretched. “Ready for the real work now?”

I groaned, feeling the soreness in my arm muscles already. “Sure, bring it on.”

He started cleaning the debris off the seats, as I followed behind to push them against the wall. When that was done, he handed me a broom. “We’ve got to get the whole area swept up, pack everything into the boxes, and then store them all away again. You get started, and I’ll turn in the money boxes to Mr. Maurizio.”

“No problem.”

I started moving slowly across the floor, pushing the broom in front of me. I wound forward and back, like a swimmer doing laps, as I methodically swept up the rubbish. My mind wandered back to the acts I had seen. I loved the dogs the best, but there was something compelling about the tiger. My thoughts kept drifting back to the big cat.

I wonder what it's like up close. And why does it smell like sandalwood?
I didn't know anything about tigers except what I had seen late at night

on the Nature Channel and in old issues of *National Geographic*. I'd never been that interested in tigers before, but then again, I'd never worked in a circus before either.

I'd almost finished sweeping by the time Matt came back. He bent to help me scoop up the giant mound of trash before we spent a good hour packing up boxes and hauling them back to storage.

When this was done, Matt told me that I could have an hour or two off until it was time to join the troupe for dinner. I was eager to have a little time to myself, so I hurried back to the tent.

I changed clothes, wiggled into an only slightly uncomfortable place on my cot, and pulled out my journal. As I nibbled on my pen, I reflected on the interesting people I had met here. It was obvious that the circus folk considered each other family. Several times, I noticed people stepping in to help, even if it wasn't their job. I also wrote a bit about the tiger. The tiger really interested me. *Maybe I should work with animals and study that in college*, I reflected. Then I thought about my extreme dislike of biology and knew I'd never make it in that field.

It was almost time for dinner. The delectable aroma coming from the big building made my mouth water.

This was nothing like Sarah's vegan cookies, I thought. *No, it had the homey feel of Grandma's biscuits and gravy.*

Inside, Matt was setting up chairs around eight long folding tables. One of the tables was set up with Italian takeout. It looked fantastic. I offered to help, but Matt brushed me aside.

"You worked hard today, Kelsey. Relax, I got this," he said.

Cathleen waved me over. "Come sit by me. We can't start eating until Mr. Maurizio comes in to make the evening announcements."

Sure enough, the moment we sat down, Mr. Maurizio strolled dramatically into the building. "*Favoloso* performance, everyone! And a

most *eccellente* job to our newest salesperson, eh? Tonight is a celebration! *Mangiate*. Fill your plates, *mia famiglia!*"

I giggled. *Huh. He plays the part all the time, not just for the show.*

I turned to Cathleen. "I guess that means we did a good job, right?"

She answered, "Yep. Let's eat!"

I waited in line with Cathleen, and then picked up my paper plate and filled it with Italian green salad, a big scoop of spinach-and-cheese-stuffed shells covered in tomato sauce, parmesan chicken, and, not having enough room on my plate, popped a warm breadstick into my mouth, grabbed a bottle of water, and sat down. I couldn't help but notice the large chocolate cheesecake for dessert, but I wasn't even able to finish the dinner I had on my plate. Sighing, I left the cheesecake alone.

After dinner, I moved to a quiet corner of the building and called to check in with Sarah and Mike. When I hung up, I approached Matt, who was putting all the leftovers into the fridge. "I didn't see your dad at the table. Doesn't he eat?"

"I took him a plate. He was busy with the tiger."

"How long has your dad been working with the tiger?" I asked, eager to learn more about the impressive cat. "According to the job description, I'm supposed to help out with the tiger somehow."

Matt shoved aside a half empty bottle of orange juice, wedged a box of takeout food next to it, and shut the refrigerator. "For the past five years or so. Mr. Maurizio purchased the tiger from another circus, and they had bought it from another circus before that. The tiger's history wasn't well documented. Dad says the tiger will perform only the standard tricks and refuses to learn anything new, but the good news is that it's never given him a problem. It's a very quiet, almost docile beast, as far as tigers go."

"So what do I have to do to it? I mean, am I really supposed to feed it?"



“Don’t worry. It’s not that hard as long as you avoid the big teeth,” Matt joked. “I’m kidding. You’ll just be bringing the tiger’s food back and forth from building to building. See my dad tomorrow. He’ll give you all the info you need.”

“Thanks, Matt!”

There was about an hour left of light outside, but I had to get up early again. After showering, brushing my teeth, and changing into my warm flannel pj’s and slippers, I hurried back to my tent and got cozy under my grandma’s quilt. Reading a chapter in my book made me drowsy, so I quickly fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning after breakfast, I hurried to the kennel and found Matt’s dad playing with the dogs. He looked a lot like an adult version of Matt, with the same brown hair and brown eyes. He turned to me as I approached and said, “Hello. It’s Kelsey, right? I understand you’ll be my assistant today.”

“Yes, sir.”

He shook my hand warmly and smiled. “Call me Andrew or Mr. Davis, if you prefer something more formal. The first thing we need to do is take these feisty little critters for a walk around the grounds.”

“Sounds easy enough.”

He laughed. “We’ll see.”

Mr. Davis gave me enough leashes to hook to five dogs’ collars. The dogs were an interesting assortment of mutts including a beagle, a greyhound mix, bulldog, a Great Dane, and a little black poodle. The animals bounced around everywhere, getting the leashes all twisted around each other—and me. Mr. Davis leaned over to help and then we started off.

It was a beautiful morning. The woods were fragrant, and the dogs were very happy, jumping about and pulling me in every direction except the one I wanted to go. They kicked up rustling pine needles and

leaves and exposed bare brown soil as they sniffed every square inch of the terrain.

As I unwound a dog from a tree I asked Mr. Davis, "Do you mind if I ask you some questions about your tiger?"

"Not at all. Ask away."

"Matt said that you guys didn't know much about the history of your tiger. Where did you get him from?"

Matt's dad rubbed a hand over the stubble on his chin and said, "Dhiren came to us when Mr. Maurizio purchased it from another small circus. He wanted to liven up the acts. He figured that I worked well with other animals, so why not tigers. We were very naïve. It usually requires extensive training to work with the big cats. Mr. Maurizio was insistent that I try and, fortunately for me, our tiger is very tractable.

"I was extremely unprepared to take on an animal of that size though I stayed and traveled with the other circus for a while. Their trainer taught me how to handle a tiger, and I learned how to care for it. I'm not sure I could have dealt with any of the other cats they were selling.

"They tried to get me interested in one of their very aggressive Siberians but I quickly realized that she wasn't for us. I negotiated for the white cat instead. The white was more even tempered and seemed to like working with me. To tell you the truth, our tiger seems bored with me most of the time."

I pondered this information as we silently walked down the trail for a while. Untangling the dogs from another tree, I asked, "Do white tigers come from India? I thought they came from Siberia."

Mr. Davis smiled. "Many people think they're from Russia because the white coat blends in with the snow, but Siberian tigers are larger and orange. Our cat is a Bengal or Indian tiger."

He looked at me thoughtfully for a moment and asked, "Are you ready to help me with the tiger today? The cages have safety latches, and I will be supervising you at all times."

I smiled, remembering the sweet scent of jasmine at the end of the tiger's performance. One of the dogs ran around my legs, trapping me and breaking the reverie for a moment.

"I would really enjoy that, thanks!" I replied.

After finishing our walk, we put the dogs back in the kennel and fed them.

Mr. Davis filled the dogs' trough with water from a green hose. He looked over his shoulder and said, "You know, tigers could be completely wiped out in the next ten years. India has already passed several laws against killing them. Poachers and villagers are mostly responsible. Tigers generally avoid humans, but they are responsible for many deaths in India every year and sometimes people take matters into their own hands."

Then, Mr. Davis gestured that I should follow him. We walked around the corner of the building to a large barn that was painted white with blue trim. He opened the wide doors for us to enter.

The bright sun filtered in and warmed the area, spotlighting the dust particles that flew around as Mr. Davis and I walked past. I was surprised at how much light shone in the two-level building despite there being only two high windows. Wide beams rose high overhead and arched across the ceiling; the walls were lined with empty stalls that held bales of hay stacked up to the ceiling. I followed him as he approached the beautiful animal wagon that had been a part of the performance yesterday.

He picked up a large jug of liquid vitamins and said, "Kelsey, meet Dhiren. Come here, I want to show you something."

We approached the cage. The tiger, who had been dozing, lifted its head and watched me curiously with bright blue eyes.

Those eyes. They were mesmerizing. They stared right into me, almost as if the tiger was examining my soul.

A wave of loneliness washed through me, but I struggled to lock it

back into the tiny part of me where I kept such emotions. I swallowed thickly and broke eye contact.

Mr. Davis pulled a lever on the side of the cage. A panel slid down, separating the side of the cage near the door from Dhiren. Mr. Davis opened the cage door, filled the tiger's water dish, added about a quarter-cup of liquid vitamin, and closed and locked the door. Then, he pushed the lever to raise the panel in the cage again.

"I'm going to do some paperwork. I want you to get the tiger's breakfast," Mr. Davis instructed. "Head back to the main building and go back behind the boxes. You'll see a large refrigerator there. Take this red wagon with you to carry the meat from the fridge back here. Then take another package out of the freezer and put it into the fridge to thaw. When you return, put the food into Dhiren's cage just like I did with the vitamins. Be sure to close the safety panel first. Can you manage that?"

I grabbed the wagon handle. "No problem," I said over my shoulder as I headed back to the door. I found the meat quickly and returned in a few minutes.

I hope that safety door holds, or I'll be what's served for breakfast, I thought as I pulled the lever, dished up the raw meat into a wide bowl, and slid it carefully into the cage. I kept a wary eye on the tiger, but it just sat there watching me.

"Mr. Davis, is that a female or a male tiger?"

A noise came from the cage, a deep rumble from the tiger's chest.

I turned to look at the tiger. "What are you growling at *me* for?"

Matt's dad laughed. "Ah, you've offended him. He's very sensitive, you know. In answer to your question, *he* is a male."

"Hmm."

After the tiger ate, Mr. Davis suggested I watch the tiger practice his performance. We closed the barn doors and slid the wooden beam down to lock them in place just to make sure the tiger couldn't escape. Then I scrambled up the ladder to the loft to watch from above. If



anything went wrong, Mr. Davis had instructed me to climb out the window and return with Mr. Maurizio.

Matt's father approached the cage, opened the door, and called Dhiren out. The cat looked at him and then put his head back on his paws, still sleepy. Mr. Davis called again. "Come!"

The tiger's mouth opened in a giant yawn and his jaws gaped wide. I shuddered looking at the huge teeth. He stood up and stretched his front legs and then his back legs one at a time. I chuckled to myself for mentally comparing this large predator with a sleepy housecat. The tiger turned around and trotted down the ramp and out of the cage.

Mr. Davis set up a stool and cracked the whip, instructing Dhiren to jump up onto the stool. He got the hoop and had the tiger practice jumping in and out of it for several minutes. He leapt back and forth, running through the various activities with ease. His movements were effortless. I could see the sinewy muscles moving under his white and black striped fur as he went through the paces.

Mr. Davis seemed to be a good trainer, but there were a couple of times that I noticed the tiger could have taken advantage of him—but didn't. Once, Mr. Davis's face was very close to the tiger's extended claws, and it would have been very easy for the tiger to take a swipe, but instead, he moved his paw out of the way. Another time, I could have sworn Mr. Davis had stepped on his tail, but again, he just growled softly and moved his tail aside. It was very strange, and I found myself even more fascinated by the beautiful animal, wondering what it would feel like to touch him.

Mr. Davis was sweating in the stuffy barn. He encouraged the tiger to return to the stool, and then placed three other stools nearby and had him practice jumping from one to the other. Finishing up, he led the cat back to its cage, gave him a special jerky treat, and motioned for me to come down.

"Kelsey, you'd better head on over to the main building and help



Matt get ready for the show. We have a bunch of senior citizens coming in today from a local center.”

I climbed down the ladder. “Would it be okay if I bring my journal in here to write sometimes? I want to draw the tiger’s picture in it.”

He said, “That’s fine. Just don’t get too close.”

I hurried out the building, waved at him, and shouted, “Thanks for letting me watch you. It was really exciting!”

I rushed back to help Matt just as the first bus pulled into the parking lot. It was completely the opposite from the day before. First, the woman in charge bought all the tickets at once, which made my job much easier, and then all the patrons shuffled slowly into the ring, found their seats, and promptly fell asleep.

How could they sleep through all the noise? When intermission came, there wasn’t much to do. Half of the attendees were still asleep, and the other half were in line for the restroom. Nobody really bought anything.

After the show, Matt and I cleaned up quickly, which gave me a few hours for myself. I ran back to my cot, pulled out my journal, a pen and pencil, and my quilt and walked over to the barn. I pulled open the heavy door and turned on the lights.

Strolling toward the tiger’s cage, I found him resting comfortably with his head on his paws. Two bales of hay made a perfect chair with a backrest; my quilt spread over my lap warmed me as I opened my journal. After writing a couple of paragraphs, I began to sketch.

I’d taken a couple of art classes in high school and was fairly decent at drawing when I had a model to look at. I picked up my pencil and looked at my subject. He was looking right at me—not like he wanted to eat me, it was more like . . . he was trying to tell me something.

“Hey, Mister. What are you looking at?” I grinned.

I started my drawing. The tiger’s round eyes were wide-set and a



brilliant blue. He had long, black eyelashes and a pink nose. His fur was a soft, creamy white with black stripes radiating away from his forehead and cheeks, all the way down to the tail. The short, furry ears were tilted toward me, and his head was resting lazily on his paws. As he watched me, his tail flicked back and forth leisurely.

I spent a lot of time trying to get the pattern of stripes right because Mr. Davis had told me that no two tigers had the same stripes. He said that their stripes were as distinctive as human fingerprints.

I continued to speak to him while drawing. "What's your name again? Ah, Dhiren. Well, I'll just call you Ren. Hope that's alright with you. So how's your day been? Did you enjoy your breakfast? You know, you have a very handsome face, for something that could eat me."

After a quiet pause with the only sounds being the scratch of my pencil and the deep rhythmic breathing of the large animal, I asked, "Do you like being a circus tiger? I can't imagine it's a very exciting life for you, being stuck in that cage all the time. I know *I* wouldn't like it very much."

I fell quiet for a while and bit my lip as I shaded in the stripes of his face. "Do you like poetry? I'll bring in my book of poems and read to you sometime. I think I have one about cats you might like."

I looked up from my drawing and was startled to see that the tiger had moved. He was sitting up, his head bent down toward me, and he was staring at me steadily. I started to feel a little bit nervous. *A large cat staring at you with great intensity can't be a good thing.*

Right then, Matt's dad strolled into the building. The tiger slumped down onto its side, but kept his face turned toward me, watching me with those deep blue eyes.

"Hey, kid, how're you doing?"

"Umm, I'm fine. Hey, I have a question. Doesn't he ever get *lonely* by himself? Haven't you tried to, you know, find him a girl tiger?"

He laughed. "Not for him. This one likes to be alone. The other circus said they tried to produce offspring by breeding him with a white female in heat at the zoo, but he wouldn't have it. He stopped eating, so they pulled him out of there. I guess he prefers bachelorhood."

"Oh. Well, I'd better get back to Matt and help him out with the dinner preparations." I closed my journal and gathered my things.

As I strolled back to the main building, my thoughts were drawn to the tiger. *Poor thing. All alone with no girl tiger and no tiger cubs. No deer to hunt and stuck in captivity.* I felt sorry for him.

After dinner, I helped Matt's dad walk the dogs again and got settled in for the night. I put my hands under my head and stared at the tent ceiling, thinking some more about the tiger. After tossing and turning for about twenty minutes, I decided to go visit the barn again. I kept all the lights off in the building except the one near the cage and went back to my hay bale with my quilt.

Because I was feeling sentimental, I had brought a paperback copy of *Romeo and Juliet*.

"Hey, Ren. Would you like me to read to you for a while? Now Romeo and Juliet don't have any tigers in their story, but Romeo does climb a balcony, so you just picture yourself climbing a tree, okay? Wait a second. Let me create the proper setting."

The moon was full so I turned off the light and decided the moonlight coming through the two high windows brightened the barn sufficiently to read by.

The tiger's tail thumped the wooden base of the wagon. I turned on my side, made a pillow of sorts from the hay, and started reading aloud. I could just make out his profile and see his eyes shining in the shadowy light. I started getting tired and sighed.

"Ah. They don't make men like Romeo anymore. Maybe there never has been such a man. Present company excluded, of course. I'm sure



you're a very romantic tiger. Shakespeare sure wrote about dreamy men, didn't he?"

I closed my eyes to rest them a little and didn't wake up until the next morning.

From that moment on, I spent all my free time in the barn with Ren, the tiger. He seemed to like me being there and always perked his ears up when I started reading to him. I bugged Matt's dad with question after question about tigers until I was sure he felt like avoiding me. He appreciated the work I did though.

Every day, I got up early to take care of the tiger and the dogs, and every afternoon I wandered in to sit near Ren's cage and write in my journal. In the evenings, I would bring my quilt and a book to read. Sometimes, I'd pick out a poem and read it out loud. Other times, I just talked to him.

About a week after I had started working there, Matt and I were watching one of the shows as usual. When it was time for Ren to perform, he seemed to act differently. After trotting down the tunnel and entering the cage, he ran around in circles and paced back and forth several times. He kept looking out at the audience as if he was searching for something.

Finally, he froze as still as a statue, and stared right at me. His tiger eyes locked with mine, and I couldn't turn my head away. I heard the whip crack several times, but the tiger stayed focused on me. Matt elbowed me, and I broke eye contact.

"That's really strange," Matt said.

I asked him, "What's wrong? What's going on? Why is he looking at us?"

He shrugged. "It's never happened before. I don't know."

Ren finally turned away from us and began his normal routine.

After the show was over and I had finished cleaning up, I went to visit Ren, who was pacing in his cage. When he saw me, he sat down, settled himself, and placed his head on his paws. I walked up to the cage.

“Hey, Ren. What’s going on with you today, Mister? I’m worried about you. I hope you aren’t getting sick or something.”

He rested quietly, but kept his eyes on me and followed my movements. I approached the cage slowly. I felt drawn to the animal and couldn’t seem to block out a very strong, dangerous compulsion. It was almost a tangible pull. Maybe it was because I felt we were both lonely or maybe it was because he was such a beautiful creature. I don’t know the reason, but I wanted—I *needed*—to touch him.

I knew it was risky, but I wasn’t scared. Somehow, I *knew* that he wouldn’t hurt me, so I ignored the red-alert bells dinging in my head. My heart began beating very fast. I took another step closer to the cage and stood there for a moment, shaking. Ren wasn’t moving at all. He just continued to look at me calmly with his vivid blue eyes.

I slowly reached my hand out toward the cage, stretching just my fingertips to his paw. I made contact and touched his soft, white fur with the tips of my fingers. He exhaled a deep sigh, but other than that he didn’t move. Feeling braver, I placed my whole hand on top of his paw, petted it, and traced one of his stripes with my finger. The next thing I knew, his head moved toward my hand. Before I could pull my hand out of the cage, he licked it. It tickled.

I withdrew my hand quickly. “Ren! You scared me! I thought you were going to bite off my fingers!” I tentatively held out my hand near the cage again, and his pink tongue darted out between the bars to lick my hand. I let him lick a few more times, and then headed over to the sink and washed the tiger saliva off.

Returning to my favorite spot by the hay bale, I said, “Thanks for not eating me.”

He huffed quietly in response.





“What would you like to read today? How about that cat poem I promised you?”

I sat down, opened my poetry book, and found the right page. “Okay, here goes.”

I AM THE CAT

by Leila Usher

*In Egypt, they worshiped me
I am the Cat.
Because I bend not to the will of man
They call me a mystery.
When I catch and play with a mouse,
They call me cruel,
Yet they take animals to keep
In parks and zoos, that they may gape at them.
They think all animals are made for their pleasure,
To be their slaves.
And, while I kill only for my needs,
They kill for pleasure, power and gold,
And then pretend to a superiority!
Why should I love them?
I, the Cat, whose ancestors
Proudly trod the jungle,
Not one ever tamed by man.
Ah, do they know
That the same immortal hand
That gave them breath, gave breath to me?
But I alone am free
I am THE CAT.*



I closed my book and gazed reflectively at the tiger. I imagined him proud and noble, racing through the jungle on a hunt. I suddenly felt very, very sorry about his situation. *It can't be a good life, performing in a circus, even if you have a good trainer. A tiger isn't a dog or a cat to be somebody's pet. He should be free in the wild.*

I stood up and walked back over to the tiger. Hesitantly, I reached my hand into his cage to pat his paw again. Immediately, his tongue flew out to lick my hand. I laughed at first and then sobered. Slowly, I moved my hand up to his cheek and stroked the soft fur. Then, feeling brave, I scratched him behind his ear. A deep vibration rumbled in his throat, and I realized he was purring. I grinned and scratched his ear some more.

"Like that, do you?"

I pulled my hand out of the cage, slowly again, and watched him for a minute, deliberating on what had happened. He had an almost human expression of melancholy on his face. *If tigers have souls, and I believe they do, I imagine his to be a lonely and sad one.*

I looked into those big blue eyes and whispered, "I wish you were free."



the stranger

Two days later, I found a tall, distinguished man dressed in an expensive black suit standing next to Ren's cage. His thick, white hair was cut short, and he had a closely trimmed beard and mustache. His eyes were dark brown, almost black, and he had a long, aquiline nose and an olive complexion. The man was alone, talking softly, and definitely looked like he did not belong in a barn.

"Hello? Can I help you?" I queried.

The man whipped around quickly, smiled at me, and replied, "Hello! You must be Miss Kelsey. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Anik Kadam. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." He pressed his hands together and bowed.

And I thought chivalry was dead.

"Yes, I'm Kelsey. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Perhaps there *is* something you can do for me." He smiled warmly and explained, "I would like to speak to the owner of your circus about this magnificent animal."

Confused, I replied, "Sure, Mr. Maurizio is in the back of the main building in the black motor home. Do you want me to take you there?"

"No need to trouble yourself, my dear. But, thank you kindly for the offer. I will go and see him immediately."

Turning, Mr. Kadam left the barn, quietly shutting the door behind him.

After checking Ren to make sure he was okay, I said, "Now *that* was strange," I said. "I wonder what he wanted. Maybe he has a thing for tigers." I hesitated for a moment, and then reached my hand through the cage bars. Amazed at my own boldness, I stroked his paw briefly and then began to get his breakfast ready.

Speaking over my shoulder, I said, "It's not every day a person sees a tiger as handsome as you are, you know. He probably just wants to compliment you on your performance."

Ren huffed in response.

I decided to grab a bite to eat myself and headed toward the main building—only to discover a flurry of unusual activity. People were gathered together, gossiping in small, scattered groups. I snatched a chocolate chip muffin and a bottle of cold milk and cornered Matt.

"What's going on?" I mumbled around a big bite of my muffin.

"I'm not exactly sure. My dad, Mr. Maurizio, and another man are in a serious meeting, and we were told to put a hold on our daily activities. We were instructed to wait here. We're *all* wondering what's going on."

"Hmm." I sat and ate my muffin, listening to the wild theories and speculations of the troupe.

We didn't have to wait long. A few minutes later, Mr. Maurizio, Mr. Davis, and Mr. Kadam, the stranger I'd met earlier, walked into the building.

"*Sedersi*, my friends. Sit. Sit!" Mr. Maurizio said with a beaming smile. This man, Mr. Kadam, has made me the most happy of men. He has made an offer to purchase our beloved *tigre*, Dhiren."

There was an audible gasp in the room as several people jostled in their seats and softly whispered to one another.

Mr. Maurizio continued, "Now, now . . . *fate silenzio*. Shh, *amici*



miei. Let me finish! He wishes to take our *tigre* back to India to the Ranthambore National Park, the great *tigre* reserve. Mr. Kadam's *denaro* will provide for our troupe for two years! Mr. Davis is in *d'accordo* with me and also feels that the tiger will be assuredly happier there."

I glanced at Mr. Davis, who solemnly nodded.

"It's agreed we will finish the shows for this week, and then the *tigre* will go with Mr. Kadam *con l'aereo*, by airplane, to India, while we will move on to our next city. Dhiren will stay with us this last week until we make the *grandioso* finale next Saturday!" the ringleader concluded and thumped Mr. Kadam on the back.

The two men turned and disappeared out of the building.

All at once, the hushed crowd started moving around quickly and began talking with each other. Silently, I watched them as they darted back and forth among the different groups like a flock of chickens at feeding time, scuttling in and out of the crowd and pecking for tidbits of information and gossip. They spoke in excited tones and patted each other's backs, murmuring animated congratulations that their next two years on the road were already paid for.

Everybody was happy except me. I sat there holding the remainder of my muffin in my limp hand. My mouth was still hanging open, and I felt frozen to my chair. After I pulled myself together, I got Matt's attention.

"What does this mean for your dad?"

He shrugged. "Dad still has the dogs, and he's always had an interest in working with miniature horses. Now that the circus has more money, maybe Dad can get Mr. Maurizio to purchase a couple that he could start training."

He walked off while I pondered the question, *what does this mean for me?* I felt . . . distressed. I knew that this circus gig would end soon anyway, but I'd put it out of my mind. I would really miss Ren. I didn't

realize how much until that very moment. Still, I was happy for him. I sighed and chided myself for getting too emotionally involved.

Despite feeling happy for my tiger, I also felt gloomy knowing I'd miss visiting and talking to him. The rest of that day, I kept busy to keep my mind off it. Matt and I worked all afternoon, and I didn't have time to see Ren again until after dinner.

I hurried to my tent, grabbed my quilt, journal, and a book, and ran over to the barn. Finding my favorite spot, I sat down with my legs stretched out in front of me.

"Hey, Ren. Pretty big news for you, huh? You're going back to India! I really hope you'll be happy there. Maybe you can find yourself a pretty female tiger."

I heard a "harrumph" sound come from the cage and thought for a minute. "Hey, I hope you still know how to hunt and stuff. Well, I guess being on a reserve they'd keep an eye on you so you don't waste away."

I heard a noise coming from the back of the building and turned to see that Mr. Kadam had entered. I sat up a little straighter and felt a little self-conscious for being caught talking to a tiger.

"I am sorry to interrupt you," said Mr. Kadam. He glanced from the tiger to me, studied me carefully, and then stated, "You seem to have . . . affection for this tiger. Am I right?"

I answered unguardedly, "Yes. I enjoy spending time with him. So do you go around India rescuing tigers? That must be an interesting job."

Smiling, he replied, "Oh, it's not my main job. My true job is managing a large estate. The tiger is an item of interest for my employer and he's the one who has made the offer to Mr. Maurizio." He found a stool, placed it across from me, and sat down, balancing his tall body on the short stool with a natural ease I would not have expected from an older man.

I asked him, "Are you *from* India?"

“Yes,” he replied. “I was born and raised there many years ago. The main holdings of the estate that I manage are there also.”

I picked up a piece of straw and wrapped it around my finger. “Why is this owner so interested in Ren?”

His eyes twinkled as he glanced at the tiger briefly and then asked, “Do you know the story of the great Prince Dhiren?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Your tiger’s name, *Dhiren*, in my language means ‘strong one.’” He tilted his head and gazed at me thoughtfully. “A rather famous prince carried the same name, and he had quite an interesting history.”

I grinned. “You are evading my question and rather successfully too. But I love a good story. Can you remember it?”

His eyes fixed on something far off in the distance, and he smiled. “I think I can.” His voice changed. Losing its crisp cadence, Mr. Kadam’s words took on a rounded, musical tone and he began, “Long ago, there was a powerful king of India who had two sons. One he named Dhiren. The two brothers received the best education and military training.

“Their mother taught them to love the land and all the people who lived there. She often took the boys to play with underprivileged children because she wished for them to learn what their people needed. This contact also taught them to feel humility and to be grateful for the advantages they had. Their father, the king, taught them how to rule the kingdom. Dhiren, in particular, grew up to be a brave and fearless military leader as well as a sensible administrator.

“His brother was also very brave, strong, and clever. He loved Dhiren, but, at times, he felt the piercing stab of jealousy in his heart, for despite being successful in all of his training, he knew that Dhiren was destined to be the next king. It was only natural for him to feel this way.

“Dhiren had a knack for impressing people easily with his acumen,

intelligence, and personality. A rare combination of charm and modesty embodied in the prince made him an outstanding politician. A person of contradictions, he was a great warrior as well as a renowned poet. The people loved the royal family and looked forward to many peaceful and happy years under Dhiren's reign."

I nodded, fascinated by the story, and asked, "What happened to the brothers? Did they battle each other for the throne?"

Shifting on the stool slightly, he continued, "King Rajaram, Dhiren's father, arranged a marriage between Dhiren and the daughter of a ruler from a neighboring kingdom. The two kingdoms had lived in peace for many centuries but in recent years small skirmishes had broken out on the borders with increasing frequency. Dhiren was pleased with the alliance not only because the girl, whose name was Yesubai, was very beautiful, but also because he was wise enough to know that the union would bring peace to his land. They were formally engaged while Dhiren was away inspecting the troops in another part of the kingdom. During that absence, his brother began to spend time with Yesubai, and soon they fell in love with each other."

The tiger snorted loudly and thumped his tail against the wooden floor of his cage a few times.

I glanced over at him, concerned, but he seemed fine. "Shh, Ren," I admonished. "Let him tell the story."

He put his head on his paws and watched us.

Mr. Kadam continued. "He betrayed Dhiren so he could have the woman he loved. He bartered with a prodigious and evil man who captured Dhiren on his journey home. As a political prisoner, Dhiren was dragged along behind a camel and paraded through the enemy's town where the people threw stones, sticks, muck, and camel dung at him. He was tortured, his eyes were plucked out of their sockets, the hair was shaved off his head, and eventually his body was torn apart into pieces and thrown into the river."

I gasped. "How horrible!"

Mesmerized by the story, I was bursting with questions, but I held back, wanting him to finish. Mr. Kadam focused his gaze on my face and continued gravely, "When his people learned what had happened, a great sorrow spread across the land. Some say that Dhiren's people went down to the river and pulled out the torn pieces of his body to give him a proper funeral. Others say that his body was never found.

"Hearing of their beloved son's death, the king and his wife, heavy with misery, lapsed into a deep despair. Soon, both of them departed from this life. Dhiren's brother ran away in shame. Yesubai took her own life. The Mujulaain Empire was thrown into dark shadows of morass and disarray. With the authoritative voice of the royal family gone, the military took over the kingdom. Eventually, the evil man who had killed Dhiren captured the throne but only after fifty years of terrible war and bloodshed."

As he finished his story, there was a tangible silence. Ren's tail rustled in his cage, which snapped me out of my reverie.

"Wow," I responded. "So, did he *love* her?"

"Of whom are you speaking?"

"Did Dhiren love Yesubai?"

He blinked. "I . . . don't know. Many marriages were arranged in those days, and love often wasn't a consideration then."

"That's a very sad sequence of events. I feel sorry for everyone, except for the bad guy, of course. A great story, though a bit bloody. An Indian tragedy. It reminds me of Shakespeare. He would have written a great play based on that tale. So, Ren is named after that Indian prince?"

Mr. Kadam raised his eyebrow and smiled. "It would appear so."

I looked over at the tiger and grinned. "See, Ren, you're a hero! You're one of the good guys!" Ren pricked his ears forward and blinked

his eyes, watching me. "Thanks for sharing that story with me. I will definitely be writing about that in my journal."

I tried to pull him back to my original question, "But, it still doesn't explain why your employer is interested in tigers."

He cleared his throat while looking at me obliquely, stalling for a moment. For someone so eloquent, he fumbled awkwardly through his next words. He answered, "My employer has a special connection with this white tiger. You see, he feels he is to blame for the tiger's imprisonment—no, that is too harsh a word—for his capture. My employer allowed himself to be ensnared in a situation that led to the tiger being caged and sold. He has followed the tiger's whereabouts for the last few years, and now he's finally in a position to make amends."

"Huh. That's very interesting. It was *his* fault that Ren was captured in the first place? It's very kind of him to continue to be concerned about an animal's welfare like that. Please thank him for what he's doing for Ren."

He bowed his head toward me in acknowledgment, then, hesitating, fixed a somber gaze on me and queried, "Miss Kelsey, I hope it's not too forward of me to ask, but I need someone to accompany the tiger on his journey to India. I will not be able to tend to his daily needs or even travel with him for the entire journey. I have already asked Mr. Davis if he could accompany Dhiren, but he must stay here with the circus." He leaned forward on the stool and gestured slightly with his hands. "I would like to offer *you* that job. Would you be interested?"

I stared at his hands for a moment, thinking that a man such as he should have long, tapered, manicured fingers, but his fingers were thick and calloused, like a man accustomed to hard labor.

Mr. Kadam leaned forward. "The tiger is already used to you, and I can pay a good wage. Mr. Davis suggested you as a likely candidate and he mentioned that your temporary employment here is almost at an end.

If you choose to accept the job, I can assure you that my employer would appreciate having someone who can care for the tiger better than I can. The entire trip should take about a week, but I have been instructed to pay for your entire summer. I know that doing this for me will take you away from your home and delay your search for a new position elsewhere, so you will be duly compensated.”

“What exactly would I have to do? Wouldn’t I need a passport and other paperwork done?” I asked.

He inclined his head toward me. “I can, of course, arrange all the preliminaries for the trip. The three of us would fly to Mumbai, what you might still call Bombay. Upon arrival, I must stay in town on business, and you would then continue to accompany the tiger on the drive to the reserve. I will hire drivers and loaders to assist you on the journey. Your primary responsibility will be to care for Ren, feed him, and see to his comfort.”

“And then . . . ?”

“The journey over land is about ten to twelve hours one way. After you arrive at the reserve, you would stay there for a few days to ensure he is acclimating well to his new environment and comparative freedoms. I would purchase a return plane ticket from Jaipur, so that you will be able to ride the Jaipur tour bus that goes from the reserve to the airport, then fly to Mumbai and home from there, making your return trip a little bit shorter.”

“So it would be about a week altogether?” I asked.

He replied, “You can choose to either fly back home immediately or, if you like, you may stay on vacation in India for a few days and enjoy touring before you go home. Rest assured, I would provide for all of your travel as well as any other necessary accommodations along the way.”

I blinked and stammered, “That’s a very generous offer. Yes, my

position here at the circus is almost at an end, and I would have to start looking for a new job very soon.”

I bit my lip and started pacing, mumbling indecisively to myself as much as to him. “India’s very far away. I’ve never been out of the country before, so the idea of it is both exciting and scary at the same time. Can I think about it and let you know? When do you need for me to give you an answer?”

“The sooner you say yes, the sooner I can make the necessary arrangements.”

“Alright. Let me call my foster parents and talk with Mr. Davis to see what they think about all this, and then I’ll let you know for sure.”

Mr. Kadam nodded and mentioned that Mr. Maurizio knew how to contact him when I was ready to inform him of my decision. He also said that he would be around the circus for the rest of the afternoon finalizing paperwork.

With jumbled thoughts, I grabbed my things and walked back to the main building. *India? I’ve never been to a foreign country before. What if I can’t communicate with anyone? What if something bad happens to Ren while he’s under my care?*

Despite all the *what ifs* that were rolling around my brain, a part of me was seriously contemplating Mr. Kadam’s offer. It was very tempting to spend a little more time with Ren, plus I’d always wanted to visit a foreign country. I could have a mini summer vacation and be paid too. Plus, Mr. Kadam didn’t strike me as one of those creepy men with bad intentions. In fact, he seemed trustworthy and grandfatherly.

I decided to ask Mr. Davis’s opinion and found him teaching the dogs a new trick. He confirmed that Mr. Kadam had offered him the same job and that he’d been tempted to do it.

“I think it would be a great experience for you. You’re terrific with animals, especially with Ren. If that’s something you think you’d like to

focus on in a future career, then you should consider it. The job would look good on a résumé.”

Thanking him, I decided to call Sarah and Mike, who wanted to meet Mr. Kadam, check his credentials, and find out what kinds of safety measures he planned to use. They suggested throwing an impromptu birthday party for me at the circus so they could celebrate with me and meet Mr. Kadam at the same time.

After taking some time to think about the pros and cons, I felt my excitement for the trip melt away my nerves. *I really would like to go to India and see Ren settled on the tiger reserve. It would be an opportunity to do something that I'd never get the chance to do again.*

I walked back to the tiger cage and found Mr. Kadam already there. He was alone and appeared to be talking quietly to the tiger again.

I guess he likes talking to tigers as much as I do.

Just inside the door, I paused. “Mr. Kadam? My foster parents would like to meet you and wanted me to invite you to my birthday celebration tonight. They are bringing cake and ice cream after the evening performance. Can you come?”

His face lit up with a radiant, delighted smile. “Wonderful! I would love to come to your party!”

“Don’t get too excited. They’re likely to bring soy ice cream and gluten-free, sugar-free cupcakes.” I laughed.

After speaking to him, I called my family to finalize the plans.

Sarah, Mike, and the kids came early to watch the show and were thoroughly impressed with Ren’s performance. They loved meeting everyone. Mr. Kadam was polite and charming and told them that it would be impossible to accomplish his task without my help.

“I assure you that we will be in constant communication and Kelsey can call you at any time,” he said.

Mr. Davis later added his two cents. "Kelsey is more than capable of doing the job as Mr. Kadam defines it. It's essentially the same thing she's been doing at the circus for the past two weeks. Plus it will be a great experience. I wish I could go myself."

We all had a great time, and it was fun having a circus party. Sarah even brought normal cupcakes and my favorite brand of ice cream. It might not have been a typical eighteenth birthday, but I was content to just be with my foster family, my new friends at the circus, and my carton of Tillamook Mudslide.

After the festivities, Sarah and Mike pulled me aside and reminded me to touch base with them often during my trip to India. They could see on my face that I was determined to go, and they immediately felt as comfortable with Mr. Kadam as I did. I hugged them excitedly and went to share the good news.

Mr. Kadam beamed a happy smile and said, "Now, Miss Kelsey, it will take me approximately one week to arrange the transportation. I will also need to obtain a copy of your birth certificate from your guardians and arrange traveling papers for both the tiger and yourself. My plan is to leave tomorrow morning and return as soon as I have the necessary documents."

Later, as he prepared to leave, Mr. Kadam walked over to shake my hand and held it for a minute, saying, "Thank you very much for your help. You have assuaged my fears and given hope to a disillusioned old man that has anticipated only calamity and disappointment." He squeezed my hand, patted it, and stepped quickly out the door.

With the day's excitement behind us, I went to visit Ren. "Here. I snuck in a cupcake. Probably not on your tiger diet, but you might as well celebrate too, huh?"

He gently took the cupcake from my outstretched hand, swallowed it in one gulp, and then started licking frosting off my fingers. I giggled and went to wash my hand.

“I wonder what Mr. Kadam was talking about. Calamity? Assuaged fears? He’s a bit dramatic. Wouldn’t you agree?”

I yawned and scratched him behind the ear, grinning as he leaned his head into my palm. “Well, I’m sleepy. I’m going to bed. We’ll have a fun trip together, won’t we?”

Stifling another yawn, I made sure he had enough water, then turned off the lights, shut the door, and headed to bed.

The next morning, I got up early to check on the tiger. I opened the doors and headed down to his cage, but found the door was open. He wasn’t there!

“Ren? Where are you?”

I heard a noise behind me and turned around to find him lying on a pile of hay *outside* his cage.

“Ren! How on earth did you get out? Mr. Davis is going to kill me! I’m sure I locked your cage door last night!”

The tiger got up and shook himself, getting most of the hay off his fur, and walked lazily over to me. It was then I realized I was alone in a barn with an uncaged tiger. I was scared out of my mind, but it was too late to head back out of the barn. Mr. Davis taught me never to look away from big cats, so I stuck out my chin, put my hands on my hips, and sternly ordered him back to his cage. The odd thing was that he seemed to understand what I wanted him to do. He walked past me, rubbed his side against my leg, and . . . obeyed! He padded slowly over to the ramp, flicked his tail back and forth while watching me, and was up and through the door in two great leaps.

I hurried over to close the door and, when it finally shut, let out a long breath. After getting his water and food for the day, I set off in search of Mr. Davis to break the news.

Mr. Davis took it pretty well considering that a tiger was loose. He was surprised that I was more concerned for Ren’s safety than my own.

He assured me that I'd done the right thing and was even impressed by how I'd handled it calmly. I told him that I would be more careful and make sure that the cage was always latched properly. Still, I was certain that I hadn't inadvertently left the cage unlocked.

The next week sped by in a blur. Mr. Kadam didn't reappear until the evening of Ren's last performance. He approached and asked if he could meet with me after dinner.

"Sure, I'll meet you at one of the tables over dessert," I replied.

The mood was one of celebration. When I saw Mr. Kadam enter the building, I gathered up my paper, pencil, and two dishes of ice cream and then sat down across from him.

He began by spreading out various forms and documents for me to sign.

"We will be driving the tiger in a truck from here to the Portland airport. From there we will board a cargo plane, which will fly us to New York City, pass over the Atlantic Ocean, and continue on to Mumbai. When we arrive in Mumbai, I will be leaving Ren in your capable hands for a few days while I tend to some business in the city.

"I have arranged for a truck to meet us at the Mumbai airport. You and I will supervise the workers who will be loading Ren from the airplane into the truck. A driver has been assigned to take both of you all the way to the reserve. Preparations have also been made for you to stay at the reserve for a few days. Then, you may return to Mumbai at your convenience in preparation for your trip home. I will be providing you traveling money, more than enough for any emergency."

I took notes in a frenzy, trying to copy down all of his instructions.

"Mr. Davis will help prepare Ren and will also load him onto the truck tomorrow morning. I suggest that you pack a bag for yourself that includes any personal items that you might wish to bring along. I will be



sleeping here tonight, so you may borrow my rental car and go home to gather your things, as long as you return here by early morning. Do you have any immediate questions?"

"Well, I have about a billion of them, but most of them can wait until tomorrow. I guess I'd better go home and get packed."

He smiled warmly and placed his car keys in my hand. "Thank you once again, Miss Kelsey. I look forward to our journey together. I will see you in the morning."

I smiled back and said goodnight. I went back to my tent to gather my things and visited briefly with Matt, Cathleen, Mr. Davis, and Mr. Maurizio. I had only spent a short amount of time at the circus, but I had already grown fond of them.

After wishing them luck and saying good-bye, I stopped by Ren's cage to say goodnight. He was sleeping already, so I left him alone and walked out to the parking lot.

There was only one car parked—a beautiful silver convertible. I looked at the key fob and read "Bentley GTC Convertible."

Holy cow. You have got to be kidding me. This car must be worth a fortune! Mr. Kadam trusts me to drive this?

I approached the car timidly and clicked the unlock button on the key chain. The car's headlights blinked at me. I opened the door, slid into the soft, buttery leather seats, and ran my hand over the elegant, pronounced stitching. The dashboard looked ultramodern, with handsome instrument controls and displays in a silvery metallic color. It was the most luxurious car I'd ever seen.

I started the engine and jumped as it roared to life. Even I, someone with no real knowledge of cars, could tell that this car was fast. I sighed in pleasure as I realized that it also included heated massage seats. I arrived home in just a few short minutes, groaning in disappointment that I lived so close to the fairgrounds.

Mike insisted that a Bentley needed to be parked in the garage. He eagerly moved his old sedan out to the street and parked it next to the garbage cans. The poor reliable car was thrust out the door like an old house cat while the brand new kitten got a soft pillow on the bed.

Mike ended up spending several hours in the garage that night cooing over and petting the convertible. I, on the other hand, spent my evening figuring out what to bring to India. I did my laundry, packed a large bag, and spent some time hanging out with my foster family. The two kids, Rebecca and Sammy, wanted to hear all about my two weeks at the circus. We also talked about the exciting things I might see and do in India.

They were good people, a good family, and they cared about me. Saying good-bye was hard, even though it was only temporary. Technically, I was an adult, but I was still nervous about traveling so far alone. I hugged and kissed the two kids. Mike soberly shook my hand and gave me a half hug for a long minute. Then I turned to Sarah, who pulled me into a tight embrace. We were both teary-eyed afterward, but she assured me that they would always be just a phone call away.

That night, I quickly slipped into a deep sleep and dreamed of a handsome Indian prince who happened to have a pet tiger.





the plane

The next morning, I awoke with great energy and felt positive and enthusiastic about the trip. After showering and a quick breakfast, I grabbed my bag, hugged Sarah again because she was the only one awake, and ran out to the garage. Sliding into the Bentley, I found it as delicious as I remembered.

I pulled into the fairgrounds parking lot and stopped next to a medium-sized cargo truck. The vehicle had a thick windshield, very big wheels, and tiny doors that required climbing a step to reach them. It looked like a monster truck past its prime, but, instead of being put out to pasture, it had been recruited into the cargo business. Behind the cab was a flatbed with a boxy steel frame draped with gray canvas.

The ramp was down in the back: Mr. Davis was already loading Ren into the cage. Ren wore a thick collar around his neck, which was firmly attached to a long chain that Mr. Davis and Matt both gripped tightly. The tiger seemed very calm and unruffled despite the chaos going on around him. In fact, he watched me while waiting patiently for the men to prepare the truck. Finally, they were ready, and with a command from Mr. Davis, Ren quickly catapulted up into the crate.

Mr. Kadam took my bag and slung the strap over his shoulder. He asked, "Miss Kelsey, would you like to ride in the truck with the driver or would you like to accompany me in the convertible?"

I looked at the monster cargo truck and quickly made my decision, "With you. I'd never pick a monster flatbed over a sleek convertible."

He laughed in agreement before placing my bag in the trunk of the Bentley. Knowing it was time to go, I waved good-bye to Mr. Davis and Matt, climbed back into the convertible, and buckled my seatbelt. Before I knew it, we were cruising along I-5 behind the truck.

Talking was difficult over the wind, so I just leaned my head back against the soft, warm leather and watched the scenery go by. We were actually driving at a leisurely pace—fifty-five mph, about ten miles per hour under the speed limit. Curious onlookers slowed their cars to stare at our little convoy. The traffic became heavier near Wilsonville where we quickly caught up to the morning commuters who'd passed us earlier.

The airport was about twenty miles farther on Highway 205, a small highway that sat like a teacup handle on I-5. The truck in front of us turned onto Airport Drive and then pulled off on a side street and stopped behind some large hangars. Several cargo planes were lined up and being loaded. Mr. Kadam wove between people and equipment and came to a halt near a private plane. The name on the side read Flying Tiger Airlines, and it sported the image of a running tiger.

I turned to Mr. Kadam, nodded my head toward the plane, and said, "Flying Tiger, huh?"

He grinned. "It's a long story, Miss Kelsey, and I will tell you all about it on the plane." Pulling my bag out of the trunk, he handed the keys to a man standing by who promptly got into the gorgeous car and drove it off the tarmac.

We both watched as several burly men lifted the tiger's crate with a motorized pallet jack and expertly transferred him into the plane's large, custom cage.

Satisfied that the tiger was secure and comfortable, we climbed up the plane's portable staircase and stepped inside.



I was amazed at the opulence of the interior. The plane was decorated in black, white, and chrome, which made it look sleek and modern. The black leather seats were exceptionally cozy looking, a far cry from the cabin seats on commercial jets, *and* they fully reclined!

An attractive Indian flight attendant with long, dark hair gestured to a chair and introduced herself. “My name is Nilima. Please, go ahead and take your seat, Miss Kelsey.” She had an accent similar to Mr. Kadam’s.

I asked, “Are you from India too?”

Nilima nodded and smiled at me as she fluffed a pillow behind my head. Next, she brought me a blanket and a variety of magazines. Mr. Kadam sat in the roomy chair across from me. He waved away the attendant and strapped himself in, foregoing the pillow and blanket.

I had flown in a plane only a couple of times before on vacations with my family. During the actual flight, I was usually pretty relaxed, but the takeoffs and landings made me anxious and tense. The sound of the engines probably bothered me the most—the ominous roar as they came to life—and the pushed-back-in-your-chair feeling as the plane left the earth always made me queasy. The landings weren’t fun either, but I was usually so excited to get off the plane and move around that I just wanted to be done with it.

This plane was definitely different. It was luxurious, wide open, and had plenty of legroom and comfy leather reclining chairs. It was so much nicer than flying coach. Comparing this to a regular plane was like comparing a soggy, stale French fry you find under a car seat with a giant baked potato with salt rubbed into the skin and topped with sour cream, crumbled bacon, butter, shredded cheese, and sprinkled with fresh-cracked black pepper. *Yep, this plane was loaded.*

All this luxury, coupled with the beautiful convertible car, made me wonder about Mr. Kadam’s employer. He must be someone *very* rich

and powerful in India. I tried to think of who it might be, but I couldn't even fathom a guess.

Maybe he's one of those Bollywood actors. I wonder how much money they make. No, that can't be it. Mr. Kadam has been working for him a long time, so he's probably a very old man now.

The plane had built up speed and taken off while I was pondering Mr. Kadam's mystery employer. I hadn't even noticed! Maybe it was because my chair was so soft that I just sank back into it when the plane ascended, or maybe it was because the pilot did an exceptional job. Perhaps it was a little of both. I looked out the window and watched the Columbia River grow smaller and smaller until we passed through the cloud cover and I couldn't see land anymore.

After about an hour and a half, I'd read a magazine cover to cover and finished the Sudoku puzzle as well as the crossword. I set down my magazine and looked at Mr. Kadam. I didn't want to pester him, but I had tons of questions.

I cleared my throat. He responded by smiling at me over his news magazine. Of course, the first thing that came out of my mouth was the question I cared the least about. "So, Mr. Kadam, tell me all about Flying Tiger Airlines."

He closed his magazine before setting it down on the table. "Hmm. Where to begin? My employer used to own, and I used to run, a cargo airline company called Flying Tiger Airlines Freight and Cargo or Flying Tiger Airlines for short. It was the largest major trans-Atlantic charter company in the 1940s and 1950s. We provided service to almost every continent in the world."

"Where did the name Flying Tiger come from?"

He shifted slightly in his seat. "You already know that my employer has a fondness for tigers, so it was that, coupled with the fact that a few of the original pilots had flown 'tiger' planes during WWII. You



might remember that they were painted like tiger sharks to look fierce in battle.

“In the late ’80s, my employer decided to sell the company. But he kept one plane, this one, for personal use.”

“What is your employer’s name? Will I get to meet him?”

His eyes twinkled. “Most assuredly. He will introduce himself when you land in India. I am certain he would like to converse with you.” He shifted his gaze to the back of the plane for a moment and then back to me. Smiling with an encouraging expression, he added, “Are there any other questions?”

“So you’re kind of like his vice president?”

The Indian gentleman laughed. “Suffice it to say, he is a very wealthy man who trusts me completely to handle all of his business dealings.”

“Ah, so you’re the Mr. Smithers to his Mr. Burns.”

He quirked an eyebrow at me. “I’m afraid I don’t understand your reference.”

I blushed and waved a hand. “Never mind. They’re characters on *The Simpsons*. You’ve probably never seen the show.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t. Sorry, Miss Kelsey.”

Mr. Kadam seemed slightly uncomfortable or nervous when talking about his boss, but he enjoyed talking about planes, so I encouraged him to continue. I wiggled in my seat and shifted. Kicking off my shoes, I sat cross-legged in the chair and asked, “What kind of cargo did you transport?”

He visibly relaxed. “Over the years, the company transported quite a collection of interesting cargo. For example, we won the contract to convey Aquatic World’s famous killer whale, as well as the torch from the Statue of Liberty. Most of the time, though, the cargo was quite mundane. We transported things such as canned goods, textiles, and packages, quite a variety of things, really.”

“How on earth do you fit a whale into an airplane?”

“One flipper at a time, Miss Kelsey. One flipper at a time.”

Mr. Kadam's face remained serious. I laughed hard. Wiping a tear from the corner of my eye, I clarified, “So you ran the company?”

“Yes, I spent a lot of time developing Flying Tiger Airlines. I very much enjoy aviation.” He gestured to the aircraft. “What we're riding in here is called an MD-11, a McDonnell Douglas. It's a long-range craft, which is necessary when traveling across the ocean. The body is spacious and comfortable, as you might have noticed. It has two engines mounted under the wings, and a third engine is located in the back at the base of the vertical stabilizer. Of course, the interior is built for comfort and relaxation, and we employ the pilot, ground crew, as well as other staff to ensure security.”

“Hmm, sounds . . . sturdy.”

He leaned forward a bit in his seat and spoke enthusiastically, “Though this plane is an older model, it still provides for a very swift journey.” He began numbering its features on his fingers, “It includes a stretched fuselage, a large wingspan, a refined airfoil on the wing and tail plane, and brand new engines.

“The flight deck features the most modern conveniences—electronic instrument panels, dual flight management, GPS, central fault display—and it also has automatic landing capability for bad-weather conditions. Of course, we also kept our original company name and logo on the side, which you identified when we boarded.”

He had become eagerly spirited during his technical ruminative. I'm sure it all meant *something*, but what exactly, I had no idea. The only thing I got out of it was that it was a pretty darn good plane and sounded like it had three engines.

He must have figured out that I had no clue what he was talking about because he looked at my perplexed face and chuckled. “Perhaps



we should discuss something else, eh? What if I share some tiger myths from my homeland?"

I nodded enthusiastically, urging him to go on. I drew my legs to the side and tucked them into my chair. Then I pulled my blanket up to my chin and leaned back into my pillow.

Mr. Kadam's intonation changed as he went into storytelling mode. His English articulation dropped off, and his brisk accent became more pronounced, the words more melodic. I enjoyed listening to the cadence of his rhythmic voice.

"The tiger is considered the great protector of the jungle. Several Indian myths say the tiger has great powers. He will bravely combat great dragons but he will also help simple farmers. One of his many tasks is to tow rain clouds with his tail, ending drought for humble villagers."

"I'm very interested in mythology. Do the people of India still believe in these tiger myths?"

"Yes, especially in the rural areas. But, you will find believers in all parts of the country, even among those who consider themselves a part of today's modern world. Did you know that some say that a tiger's purrs will stop nightmares?"

"Mr. Davis said that tigers can't purr. He told me that big cats that growl and roar can't purr, but sometimes I swear Ren purrs."

"Ah, you are correct. Modern science says that a tiger cannot produce the sound identified as a purr. Several of the larger cats make a pulsating noise, but it isn't quite the same as the purr of a housecat. Still, there are some Indian myths that speak of a tiger purring. It's also said that a tiger's body has unique healing properties. This is one of the reasons why they are regularly hunted and killed and their bodies mutilated or sold for parts."

He leaned back in his chair, relaxing. "In Islam, it is believed that Allah will send a tiger to defend and protect those who follow him



faithfully, but he will also send a tiger to punish those he considers traitors.”

“Hmm, I think if I were Islamic I would run away from it, just to be on the safe side. I wouldn’t know if it’s coming to punish or to protect.”

He laughed. “Yes, very wise of you. I confess, I have adopted somewhat of the same fascination that my employer has for tigers, and I have studied numerous texts regarding the mythology of Indian tigers, in particular.”

He trailed off for a moment, lost in thought, and his eyes glazed over. His index finger rubbed at a spot on his open collar, and I noticed he was wearing a small, wedge-shaped pendant on a chain that was half-tucked inside his shirt.

As his focus turned back to me, he quickly dropped his hand to his lap and continued, “Tigers are also a symbol of power and immortality. They are said to vanquish evil through various means. They are called life givers, sentinels, guardians, and defenders.”

I straightened my legs and angled my head back into the pillow. “Are there any damsel-in-distress type tiger myths?”

He considered, “Hmm, yes. In fact, one of my favorite stories is about a white tiger that sprouts wings and saves the princess who loves him from a cruel fate. Carrying her on his back, they relinquish their corporeal forms and become a single white streak journeying into the heavens, eventually joining the stars of the Milky Way. Together they spend eternity watching over and protecting the people of Earth.”

I yawned sleepily. “That’s really beautiful. I think that one’s my favorite too.” His soft, melodic voice had relaxed me. Despite my best efforts to stay awake and listen, I was falling asleep.

He continued steadily, “In Nagaland, they believe that tigers and men are related, that they are brothers. There is one myth that begins, ‘Mother Earth was the mother of the tiger and also of man. Once the

two brothers were happy, loved each other, and lived in harmony. But a feud began over a woman, and Brother Tiger and Brother Man fought so wildly that Mother Earth could no longer tolerate their quarrel and had to send them both away.

“Brother Tiger and Brother Man left the home of Mother Earth and emerged from a very deep, dark passage inside the earth said to be a pangolin’s den. Living together inside the earth, the two brothers still fought every day, until eventually they decided it would be better to live separately. Brother Tiger went south to hunt in the jungle, and Brother Man went north to farm in the valley. If they stayed away from each other, then both were content. But, if one encroached upon the other’s territory, fighting began anew. Many lifetimes later, the legend still holds true. If the descendants of Brother Man leave the jungles in peace, Brother Tiger will also leave us in peace. Still, the tiger is our kin, and it is said that if you stare into a tiger’s eyes long enough, you will be able to recognize a kindred spirit.”

My eyelids were drooping against my wishes. I wanted to ask what a pangolin’s den was, but my mouth wouldn’t move and my eyelids felt so heavy. I made one last effort to stay awake by shifting up in my seat a little bit, forcing my eyes open.

Mr. Kadam looked at me thoughtfully. “A white tiger is a very special kind of tiger. It is immitigably drawn to a person, a woman, who has a powerful sense of self-conviction. This woman will possess great inner strength, will have the insight to discern good from evil, and will have the power to overcome many obstacles. She who is called to walk with tigers—”

I fell asleep.

When I awoke, the chair across from me was empty. I sat up and looked around, but I didn’t see Mr. Kadam anywhere. Unbuckling my seatbelt, I headed off to find the restroom.

Opening a sliding door, I walked into a surprisingly large bathroom. This was not at all like the small boxy bathrooms in a regular plane. The lights were recessed in the walls and they softly illuminated the special features of the room. The bathroom was decorated in copper, cream, and rust colors, which were more to my liking than the modern austere look of the plane's cabin.

The first thing I noticed was the shower! I opened the glass door to peer inside. It had beautiful rust- and cream-colored tiles set in a lovely pattern. There were mounted pumps full of shampoo, conditioner, and soap. The copper showerhead was detachable, and a simple squeeze turned it on and off, similar to a kitchen sink sprayer. I figured this design would help to use less water, which wouldn't be in abundance on a plane. A thick cream-colored rug covered the beautiful tiled floor.

Off to the side two vertical cubbies, set into the wall, were filled with soft, alabaster towels held in place with a copper bar. Another wide compartment sported a silky soft, fully lined robe that felt like cashmere. It hung from a copper bar. Just under that, another smaller alcove held a pair of cashmere slippers.

A deep sink, shaped like a skinny rectangle, had a pump on each side of the copper faucet. One was full of creamy soap and the other with a sweet lavender lotion.

I finished up in the bathroom, almost hating to leave it, and headed back to my comfy seat. Mr. Kadam had returned, and Nilima, the flight attendant, brought us a delightful-smelling lunch. She had arranged a table between us and set it for two. What made our table unique were the slight depressions designed to hold all of our dinnerware. Our plates sat in short, round grooves specially made to fit them. There was a little thumbnail on one side so that the attendant could lift them in and out easily. Our glasses rested in slightly deeper grooves, and there was even

a small vase full of short-stemmed yellow roses set in its own hollowed out space.

Nilima lifted the warmer covers off our plates to set free the delicious aroma of fish.

She said, "Today's lunch is crusted hazelnut halibut with buttered asparagus, garlic mashed potatoes, and a lemon tart for dessert. What would you like to drink?"

"Water with some lemon," I responded.

"I'll have the same," said Mr. Kadam.

We enjoyed our lunch together. Mr. Kadam asked me many questions about Oregon. He seemed to have an unquenchable thirst for learning new facts and asked me about everything from sports, which I know almost nothing about, to politics, which I know absolutely nothing about, to the flora and fauna of the state, which I know a lot about.

We talked about what high school was like, my experiences at the circus, and about my hometown: the salmon runs, the Christmas tree farms, the farmer's markets, and the blackberry bushes that were so common, people actually considered them weeds. He was easy to talk with, a great listener, and I felt comfortable with him. The thought crossed my mind that he would make a wonderful grandpa. I never got a chance to know either of mine. They died before I was born, as did my other grandma.

After we finished our lunch, Nilima returned to clear our plates, and I watched how she removed the table. As she pushed a little button, a small, quiet motor sounded. The legless rectangular table tilted up until it was flush to the wall and then slid into the paneling. As the table settled, she let go of the button and instructed us to buckle up because we'd be arriving in New York soon.

The descent was as smooth as the takeoff, so I made it a point after we landed to meet the pilot and tell him that he was exceptionally

gifted. Mr. Kadam had to translate for me because the pilot didn't speak English other than basic flight words. As we refueled for the journey to Mumbai, I visited with Ren.

After making sure he had enough to eat and drink, I sat down on the floor next to his cage. He sauntered over and collapsed down on the floor right next to me. His back was stretched along the length of the cage with his striped fur sticking out through the bars tickling my legs, and his face next to my hand.

I laughed at him, leaned over to stroke the fur on his back, and recounted some of the tiger myths that Mr. Kadam had shared with me. His tail kept flicking back and forth, in and out of the cage bars.

Time flew by quickly, and the plane was soon ready to take off again. Mr. Kadam was already strapping in. I quickly patted Ren's back and returned to my chair as well.

We took off, and Mr. Kadam warned me that this would be a long flight, about sixteen hours, and also that we would lose a day on the calendar. After we reached the proper cruising altitude, he suggested that I might like to watch a movie. Nilima handed me a list of all the movies they had available, and I picked the longest one on the list: *Gone with the Wind*.

She moved to the bar area, pushed a button on the wall, and a large white screen quietly slid out from the side of the bar. My chair turned around easily to face the screen and it even reclined with a footrest, so I made myself comfortable and passed the time with Scarlett and Rhett.

When I finally got to, "After all, tomorrow is another day," I stood up and stretched. I looked out the window to see it was black outside. It only felt like 5:00 p.m., but I guessed it was probably 9:00 p.m. in our current time zone.

Nilima bustled over and returned the movie screen to its resting place, and then she began setting up the table again.

“Thank you so much for these delicious meals and thank you for the wonderful service,” I told her appreciatively.

“Yes, thank you, Nilima.” Mr. Kadam winked at her, and she inclined her head slightly and left.

I shared an amiable dinner once again with Mr. Kadam. This time we talked about his country. He told me all kinds of interesting things and described fascinating places in India. I wondered if I would have time to see or do any of those things. He spoke of ancient Indian warlords, mighty fortresses, Asian invaders, and horrible battles. When he talked, I felt like I was there seeing and experiencing it for myself.

For dinner, Nilima served us stuffed chicken Marsala with grilled zucchini and a salad. I felt a little better eating more vegetables, but then she brought out chocolate lava cakes for dessert.

I sighed. “Why does everything so bad for you always taste so dreamy?”

Mr. Kadam laughed. “Would you feel better if we shared one?”

“Sure,” I grinned, cut my lava cake in half, and scooped his portion onto a clean plate Nilima had brought out.

I licked the hot fudge sauce off my spoon. *Life, well . . . at least today anyway, was good. Very good. I could learn to live like this.*

For the next couple of hours we talked about our favorite books. He liked the classics like I did, and we had a great time revisiting memorable characters: Hamlet, Captain Ahab, Dr. Frankenstein, Robinson Crusoe, Jean Valjean, Iago, Hester Prynne, and Mr. Darcy. He also introduced me to a couple of Indian characters that sounded interesting like Arjuna, Shakuntala, and Gengi from Japanese literature.

Stifling a yawn, I went back to check on Ren again. I reached through the bars to pet his head and scratched him behind the ear.

Mr. Kadam watched me and said, “Miss Kelsey, are you not afraid of this tiger? You don’t believe that he will hurt you?”

"I think he *can* hurt me, but I know he *won't* hurt me. It's hard to explain, but I feel safe with him, almost like he's more of a friend than a wild animal."

Mr. Kadam didn't seem alarmed, only curious. He spoke softly to Nilima for a moment.

She approached me, inquiring, "Are you ready to sleep for a while, Miss?"

I nodded, and she showed me where my bag had been stowed. I picked it up and set off for the bathroom. I wasn't gone for very long, but she'd been very busy.

There was now a curtain dividing the area, and she'd set up a pullout couch that became a snug bed with satin sheets and thick, soft pillows. A recessed light with a button was set into the wall right next to the bed. The plane was darkened, and she told me that Mr. Kadam would be on the other side of the curtain if I needed anything.

I quickly checked the tiger's cage. He watched me drowsily through slit eyes with his head on his paws.

"Goodnight, Ren. See you in India tomorrow."

Too tired to read, I climbed under the soft, silky covers, turned off the light, and let the drone of the engines lull me to sleep.

The smell of bacon woke me up. I peeked around the corner and saw Mr. Kadam seated, reading the paper with a glass of apple juice on the table in front of him. He looked at me over the paper. I saw that his hair was slightly wet and that he was already dressed for the day.

"Best attend your morning ablutions, Miss Kelsey. We will be arriving soon."

I grabbed my bag and headed for the luxurious bathroom. I took a quick shower, soaping through my hair with the fragrant rose-scented shampoo. When finished, I wrapped my hair with a thick towel and

pulled on the cashmere robe. I sighed deeply and let myself bask in the soft fabric for a moment while I decided what to wear. I chose a red blouse with jeans and brushed my hair back into a ponytail, tying it with a red ribbon. Hurrying back to Mr. Kadam, I sunk down in the leather chair while Nilima brought me a hot plate of bacon, eggs, and toast.

I ate the eggs, nibbled on the toast, and drank some orange juice, but decided to save my bacon for Ren. As Nilima stowed the bed and the table from breakfast, I wandered over to the cage with my treat. Trying to tempt him, I held out a piece through the cage. He came over, very gently bit the edge, pulled it out of my hand, and then swallowed it down in one gulp.

I laughed. "Gee, Ren, you've got to chew it. Wait, do tigers chew? Well, at least eat it slower. You probably never get a treat like this." I held out the other three pieces one by one. He gulped them all down and then shot his tongue through the bars to lick my fingers.

I laughed quietly and went to the bar to wash my hands. Then I cleaned up all my belongings and stowed my bag in the overhead compartment. I'd just finished when Mr. Kadam approached. He pointed out the window and said, "Miss Kelsey, welcome to India."





mumbai

I gazed out the window as we flew over the ocean and into the city. I guess I hadn't really expected a modern city, and I was amazed by the hundreds of tall, white, uniform buildings spread out before me. As we circled the large, half-moon-shaped airport, the plane's wheels drop in preparation for our landing.

The sleek aircraft bounced twice and settled down to hug the runway. I whirled in my chair to see how Ren was doing. He was standing up expectantly but, other than that, he seemed alright. I felt a rush of exuberant energy as we taxied across the runway and came to a stop on the outskirts of the airstrip.

"Miss Kelsey, are you ready to disembark?" Mr. Kadam asked.

"Yes. Just let me grab my bag."

I slung it over my shoulder, stepped out of the plane, and skipped quickly down the steps to the ground. Deeply inhaling the wet, sultry air, I was surprised to see a gray sky. It was warm and humid but tolerable.

"Mr. Kadam, isn't it usually hot and sunny in India?"

"This is the monsoon season. It's almost never cold here, but we do get rain in July and August and, on occasion, a cyclone."

I handed him my bag and strolled over to watch some workers attempt to load Ren. This was a much different operation than it had

been in the United States. Two men attached long chains to his collar while another man affixed a ramp onto the back of a truck. They got the tiger out of the plane okay, but then the man closest to Ren pulled on the chain too tightly. The tiger reacted fast. He roared angrily and half-heartedly swiped his paw at the man.

I knew it was dangerous for me to approach, but something pushed me forward. Thinking only of Ren's comfort, I walked over to the frightened man, took the chain from him, and motioned for him to back away. He seemed grateful to be relieved of the responsibility. I spoke soothing words to the tiger, patted his back, and encouraged him to walk with me to the truck.

He responded immediately and walked beside me as docile as a lamb, dragging the heavy chains behind him on the ground. At the ramp, he stopped and rubbed his body against my leg. Then he jumped up into the truck, quickly turned around to face me, and licked my arm.

I stroked his shoulder affectionately and murmured to him softly, calming him while my hand moved gently over his collar and detached the heavy chains. Ren looked over at the men who were still standing frozen in the same place with stunned expressions, snuffed out his displeasure at them, and growled softly. While I was giving him water, he rubbed his head along my arm and kept his eyes trained on the workers as if he was my guard dog. The men began talking very fast to one another in Hindi.

I closed the cage and locked it while Mr. Kadam walked over to the men and spoke quietly. He did not seem surprised by what had happened. Whatever he said had reassured the men because they began moving around the area again, making sure to give the tiger a wide berth. They swiftly rounded up equipment and moved the plane into a nearby hangar.

After Ren was secured in the truck, Mr. Kadam introduced me to the driver, who seemed nice but very young, even younger than me.

Showing me where my bag was stowed, Mr. Kadam pointed out another bag that he had purchased for me. It was a large black backpack with several compartments. He unzipped a few to show me some of the items he had placed inside. The back zipper pocket contained a sizeable amount of Indian currency. Another pocket held travel documents for Ren and me. Snooping, I opened another zipper and found a compass and a lighter. The main part of the bag was stocked with energy bars, maps, and bottles of water.

“Um, Mr. Kadam, why did you include a compass and a lighter in the bag, not to mention some of these other items?”

He smiled and shrugged, zipping up the compartments and placing the bag on the front seat. “You never know what things might come in handy along the journey. I just wanted to make sure that you are fully prepared, Miss Kelsey. You also have a Hindi/English dictionary. I have given the driver instructions, but he doesn’t speak much English. I must take my leave of you now.” He smiled and squeezed my shoulder.

I suddenly felt vulnerable. Continuing the journey without Mr. Kadam left me anxious. It felt like the first day of high school all over again—if high school was one of the biggest countries in the world and everyone spoke a different language. *Well, I’m on my own now. Time to act like a grown-up.* I tried to reassure myself, but fear of the unknown was chomping away inside me and chewing a hole through my stomach.

I asked pleadingly, “Are you sure you can’t change your plans and travel with us?”

“Alas, I cannot attend you on your journey.” He smiled reassuringly. “Don’t fret, Miss Kelsey. You are more than able to care for the tiger, and I have meticulously arranged every detail of your trip. Nothing will go wrong.”

I gave him a weak smile, and he took my hand, enfolded it in both



of his for a moment, and said, "Trust me, Miss Kelsey. All will be well with you." With a twinkle in his eye and a wink, he left.

I looked at Ren. "Well, kid, I guess it's just you and me."

Impatient to start and finish the trip, the driver called back through the cab of the truck, "We go?"

"Yes, we go," I responded with a sigh.

When I climbed in, the driver stepped on the gas and never, *ever* took his foot off the pedal. He raced out of the airport and in less than two minutes was winding quickly through traffic at frightening speeds. I clutched my door and the dash in front of me. He wasn't the only insane driver though. Everybody on the road seemed to think 130 kilometers per hour, or, according to my travel guide, 80 mph in a crowded city, with hundreds of pedestrians, was not quite fast enough. Hoards of people dressed in bright, vibrant colors moved in every direction past my window.

Vehicles of every description filled the streets—buses, compact cars, and some kind of tiny, boxy car with no doors and three wheels sped by. The boxy ones must have been the local taxis because there were hundreds of them. There were also countless motorcycles, bicycles, and pedestrians. I even saw animals pulling carts full of people and produce.

I guessed that we were supposed to be driving on the left side of the road, but there seemed to be no distinct pattern or even white stripes to mark the lanes. There were very few lights, signs, or signals. Cars just turned left or right whenever there was an opening and sometimes even when there wasn't. Once, a car drove right at us on a collision course and then turned away at the last possible second. The driver kept laughing at me every time I gasped in fear.

I gradually became desensitized enough to start to take in the sights that were speeding by, and, with interest, I saw countless multicolored markets and vendors selling an eclectic variety of wares. Merchants sold



string-puppets, jewelry, rugs, souvenirs, spices, nuts, and all manner of fruits and vegetables out of small buildings or street carts.

Everyone seemed to be selling something. Billboards showed advertisements for tarot cards, palm reading, exotic tattooing, piercing, and henna body-painting shops. The entire city was a hurried, wild, vibrant, and touristy panorama with people of all descriptions and classes. It looked like there was not one square inch of the city that was unoccupied.

After a harrowing drive through the busy city, we finally made it to the highway. At last, I was able to relax my grip a bit—not because the driver was moving slower, in fact, he had sped up—but because the traffic had dropped off considerably. I tried to follow where we were going on a map, but the lack of road signs made it difficult. One thing I did notice though was that the driver missed an important turn onto another freeway that would lead us up to the tiger reserve.

“That way; go left!” I pointed.

He shrugged and waved his hand at me dismissing my suggestions. I grabbed my dictionary and tried frantically to look up the word *left* or *wrong way*. I finally found the words *kharābī rāha*, which meant *wrong road* or *incorrect path*. He gestured to the road ahead with his index finger and said, “Fast drive road.” I gave up and let him do what he wanted. It was *his* country after all. I figured he knew more about the roads than I did.

After driving for about three hours, we stopped at a tiny town called Ramkola. Calling it a town would be overemphasizing the size of the place because it boasted only a market, a gas station, and five houses. It bordered a jungle, which was where I finally found a sign.

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The driver got out of the truck and started to fill the tank with gas. He pointed to the market across the street and said, "Eat. Good food."

I grabbed the backpack and went to the rear of the truck to check on Ren. He was sprawled out on the floor of the cage. He opened his eyes and yawned when I approached but stayed in his inert position.

I walked to the market and opened the peeling squeaky door. A little bell rang announcing my presence.

An Indian woman dressed in a traditional sari emerged from a back room and smiled at me. "*Namaste*. You like food? Eat something?"

"Oh! You speak English? Yes, I would love some lunch."

"You sit there. I make."

Even though it was lunch for me, it was probably dinner for them because the sun was low in the sky. She motioned me over to a little table with two chairs that was set next to the window, and then she disappeared. The store was a small, rectangular room that housed various grocery products, souvenirs depicting the wildlife sanctuary nearby, and practical things such as matches and tools.

Indian music played softly in the background. I recognized the sounds of a sitar and heard the tinkling of bells but couldn't identify the other instruments. I glanced through the door where the woman had passed and heard the clatter of pans in her kitchen. It looked like the store was the front of a larger building and the family lived in a house attached to the back.

In surprisingly fast time, the woman returned, balancing four bowls of food. A young girl followed in behind her bringing even more bowls of food. It smelled exotic and spicy. She said, "Please to eat and enjoy."

The woman disappeared into the back, while the young girl started to straighten shelves in the store as I ate. They hadn't brought me any silverware, so I spooned up some of each dish with my fingers,

remembering to use my right hand following Indian tradition. *Lucky Mr. Kadam had mentioned that on the plane.*

I recognized the basmati rice, *naan* bread, and *tandoori* chicken, but the other three dishes I'd never seen before. I looked over at the girl, inclined my head, and asked, "Do you speak English?"

She nodded and approached me. Motioning with her fingers, she said, "Little bit English."

I pointed to a triangular pastry filled with spicy vegetables. "What is this called?"

"This *samosa*."

"What about this one and this?"

She indicated one and then the other: "*Rasmalai* and *baigan bhartha*." She smiled shyly and bustled off to work on the shelves again.

As far as I could tell, the *rasmalai* were balls of goat cheese dipped in a sweet cream sauce, and the *baigan bhartha* was an eggplant dish with peas, onions, and tomatoes. It was all very good, but a bit too much. When I was finished, the woman brought me a milkshake made with mangoes, yogurt, and goat's milk.

I thanked her, sipped my milkshake, and let my eyes drift to the scene outside. There wasn't much of a view: just the gas station and two men standing by the truck talking. One was a very handsome young man dressed in white. He faced the store and spoke with another man who had his back toward me. The second man was older and looked like Mr. Kadam. They seemed to be having an argument. The longer I watched them, the stronger my conviction became that it *was* Mr. Kadam, but he was arguing hotly with the younger man, and I couldn't picture Mr. Kadam ever becoming angry like that.

Hub, that's weird, I thought and tried to catch a few words through the open window. The older man said *nahi mahodaya* often, and the younger man kept saying *avashyak* or something like that. I thumbed



through my Hindi dictionary and found *nahi mahodaya* easily. It meant *no way* or *no, sir*. *Avashyak* was harder because I had to figure out how to spell it, but I eventually found it. That word meant *necessary* or *essential*, something that *must be* or *has to happen*.

I walked to the window to get a better look. Just then, the young man in white looked up and saw me staring at them from the window. He immediately ceased his conversation and stepped out of my line of vision, around the side of the truck. Embarrassed to be caught, but irresistibly curious, I made my way through the maze of shelves to the door. I needed to know if the older man really was Mr. Kadam or not.

Grabbing the loose door handle, I twisted it and pushed it open. It squeaked on rusty hinges. I walked across the dirt road and over to the truck, but still, I didn't see anyone. Circling the truck, I stopped at the back and saw that Ren was alert and watching me from his cage. But the two men and the driver had disappeared. I peeked into the cab. No one was there.

Confused, but remembering I hadn't paid my bill, I crossed the street and went back into the store. The young girl had already cleared away my dishes. I pulled some bills from the backpack and asked, "How much?"

"One hundred rupees."

Mr. Kadam had told me to figure out money by dividing the total by forty. I quickly calculated she was asking for two dollars and fifty cents. I smiled to myself as I thought about my math-loving dad and his quick division drills when I was little. I gave her two hundred rupees instead, and she beamed happily.

Thanking her, I told her the food was delicious. I picked up my backpack, opened the squeaky door, and stepped outside.

The truck was gone.



the jungle

How could the truck be gone?

I ran out to the gas pump and looked both ways down the dirt road. Nothing. No dust cloud. No people. Nothing.

Maybe the driver forgot about me? Maybe he needed to get something and is coming back? Maybe the truck was stolen and the driver is still around here somewhere? I knew none of these were likely scenarios, but they made me feel hopeful—if only for a minute.

I walked around to the other side of the gas pump and found my black bag lying in the dust. I rushed over to it, picked it up, and checked inside. Everything seemed to be in order.

Suddenly, I heard a noise behind me and whirled around to see Ren sitting by the side of the road. His tail twitched back and forth while he watched me. He looked like a giant abandoned puppy wagging his tail hoping someone would claim him and take him home.

I muttered, “Oh, no! This is just great! ‘Nothing will go wrong,’ Mr. Kadam said. Ha! The driver must have stolen the truck and let you out. What am I going to do now?”

Tired, scared, and alone, my mom’s words of advice came flooding back: “bad things sometimes happen to good people”; “the key to happiness is to try to make the best of, and be thankful for, the hand we’re dealt,” and her all-time favorite, “when life gives you lemons,

make lemon meringue pie.” Mom had tried and practically given up having kids—and then I came along. She always said that you never know what’s going to be right around the corner.

So, I focused on the positives. First, I still had all my clothes. Second, I had my traveling papers and a bag full of money. That was the good news. The bad news, of course, was that my ride was gone and a tiger was on the loose! I decided the first order of business was to secure Ren. I went back to the store and bought some jerky snacks and a long length of rope.

With my newly acquired fluorescent-yellow rope, I walked outside and tried to get my tiger to cooperate. He’d moved off several paces and was now heading for the jungle. I ran after him.

The sensible thing would have been to go back to the store, borrow a phone, and call Mr. Kadam. He could send some people, professional-type people, to catch him. But I was far from thinking sensibly at this point. I was afraid for Ren. I had absolutely no fear of him for myself, but what if others panicked and used weapons to subdue him? I also worried that even if he escaped, he couldn’t survive in the jungle. He wasn’t used to hunting on his own. I knew it was utterly foolish, but I chose to follow my tiger.

I begged, “Ren, come back! We need to get some help! This isn’t your reserve. Come on, I’ll give you a nice treat!” I waved the jerky snack in the air, but he kept moving. I was weighed down with Mr. Kadam’s backpack and my bag. I could keep up with him but the extra weight was too much for me to overtake him.

He wasn’t moving very quickly, but he always managed to keep several paces ahead of me. Suddenly, he loped off and darted into the jungle. My backpack bobbed heavily up and down as I chased after him. After about fifteen minutes of pursuit, sweat was trickling down my face, my clothes were stuck to my body, and my feet were dragging like heavy stones.



As my pace slowed, I entreated again, “Ren, *please* come back. We need to go back to the town. It’s going to be dark soon.”

He ignored me and began winding through the trees. He’d stop to turn and look at me every so often.

Whenever I thought I’d finally catch him, he’d accelerate and leap ahead a few feet, causing me to chase after him again. I felt like he was playing a game with me. He was always just out of reach. After following Ren for another fifteen minutes and still not catching him, I decided to take a break from my pursuit. I knew I’d traveled far from town, and the light was dimming. I was totally lost.

Ren must have realized that I wasn’t following him anymore because he finally slowed, turned around, and ambled guiltily back over to me. I glared at him.

“Figures. The minute I stop, you come back. I hope you’re happy with yourself.”

Tying the rope to his collar, I turned around in a circle and carefully studied each direction to try to get my bearings.

We had traveled deep into the jungle, looped in and out of trees, and twisted and turned numerous times. I realized, with great despair, that I’d lost all sense of direction. It was twilight, and the dark canopy of trees overhead blocked out the little sun we had left. A choking fear settled inside me, and I felt a wave of icy, nibbling cold slither slowly down my spine. It shot wintry streams down my arms and legs and poked out my skin in spiky goose bumps.

I twisted the rope around my hands nervously and grumbled at the tiger. “Thanks a lot, Mister! Where am I? What am I doing? I’m who-knows-where in India, in the jungle, at night, with a tiger on a rope!”

Ren sat down quietly beside me.

My fear overwhelmed me for a minute, and I felt as if the jungle was closing in. All the distinctive sounds rushed to clatter and wrestle with



my frightened mind, attacking my common sense. I imagined creatures stalking me, their glassy, hostile eyes watching and waiting to pounce. I looked up and saw angry monsoon clouds surging, quickly swallowing up the early evening sky. A stiff, numbing wind whipped through the trees and swirled around my rigid body.

After a couple of moments, Ren got up and moved ahead, gently pulling my tense body along with him. I reluctantly followed. I laughed nervously and madly for a moment because I was letting a tiger lead me through a jungle, but I figured there was no point in *me* trying to lead the way. I had no idea where we were. Ren continued walking on some unseen path, pulling me along behind him. I lost track of time, but my best guess was that we walked through the jungle for an hour, maybe two. It was very dark now, and I was scared and thirsty.

Remembering that Mr. Kadam had packed water in the bag, I unzipped the pocket and felt around for a bottle. My hand brushed against something cold and metallic. A flashlight! I turned it on and felt a bit of relief at having a beam of light to cut through the darkness.

In the shadows, the dense jungle appeared menacing, not that it wasn't equally as terrifying during the day, but my measly flashlight beam didn't penetrate very far, which made the situation even worse. When the thin moon appeared and dispersed its beams intermittently through the thick tree cover overhead, Ren's coat gleamed where the silvery light touched it.

I peered ahead, catching shiny glimpses of his body as he moved through the undulating, flickering patches of light. When the moon hid behind the clouds, Ren disappeared completely on the trail ahead. I turned my flashlight to him and saw prickly undergrowth scratching his silvery white fur. He responded to the thorns by roughly shoving the plants aside with his body, almost as if he were making a path for me.

After walking for a long time, he finally pulled me near a copse of bamboo that was growing near a large teak tree. He stuck his nose up in the air, smelling for who-knows-what and then wandered over to a grassy area and lay down.

“Well, I guess that means this is where we sleep for the night.” I shrugged out of my backpack while grouching, “Great. No, really. It’s a lovely choice. I’d give it four stars if it included a mint.”

First, I untied the rope from Ren’s collar, figuring that my trying to keep him from running away was moot at this point, and then crouched down and unzipped my bag. Pulling out a long-sleeved shirt, I tied it around my waist and got out two water bottles and three energy bars. I unwrapped two of the energy bars and held them out to Ren.

He carefully took one out of my hand and gulped it down.

“Should a tiger eat energy bars? You probably need something with more protein, and the only thing around here with protein is me, but don’t even think about it. I taste *terrible*.”

He quirked his head at me as if seriously considering it, then quickly swallowed the second energy bar. I opened the third and slowly nibbled on it. Unzipping another pocket, I found the lighter and decided to make a fire. Searching by flashlight, I was surprised to find a good amount of wood close by.

Remembering my Girl Scout days, I built a small fire. The wind blew it out the first two times, but the third time it took, making homey little crackling sounds.

Satisfied with my work and setting aside larger logs to add later, I moved over to the backpacks closer to the fire. Finding a plastic bag in the pack, I picked up a large curved piece of bark, shoved small chunks of wood on the ends, and lined the inside with the bag. I poured a bottle of water into it and carried my makeshift bowl over to Ren. He lapped it all up and kept licking the bag, so I poured in another bottle for him, which he also drank greedily.



I walked back to the fire and was startled by an ominous howl nearby. Ren jumped up at once and rushed off in a whirl, disappearing into the darkness. I heard a deep growling and then an incensed and vicious snarl. I stared gravely into the darkness between the trees where Ren had disappeared, but he soon returned unharmed and began rubbing his side on the teak tree. Satisfied with that tree, he moved on to another one, and another one, until he'd rubbed up against every tree that surrounded us.

"Gee, Ren. That must be some itch." Leaving him to his scratching, I plumped the softer bag with my clothes in it to use for a pillow and slipped my long-sleeved shirt over my head. I pulled out my quilt, hating to get it dirty but desperately needing the warmth and comfort it offered, and spread it out over my legs. Then I eased onto my side, tucked my hand under my cheek, stared at the fire, and felt fat tears slide down my face.

I started listening to the eerie sounds around me. I heard clicks, whistles, pops, and cracks everywhere, and started to imagine creepy crawly things burrowing in my hair and down into my socks. I shivered and sat up to tuck my quilt around me snugly, so that it covered every part of my body, and settled to the ground again wrapped up mummy-style.

That was much better, but then I imagined animals creeping up behind me. Just as I began to roll onto my back, Ren lay down right next to me, snuggled his back against mine, and began to purr.

Grateful, I wiped the tears off my cheeks and was able to tune out the night sounds by listening to Ren's purr, which later changed into deep, rhythmic breathing. I inched a little closer to his back, surprised to find that I could sleep in the jungle after all.

A bright ray of sun hit my closed eyelids, and I slowly cracked them open. Not remembering where I was for a minute, I stretched my arms

up over my head, only to cringe in pain as my back rubbed against the hard ground. I also felt a heavy weight on my leg. I looked down to see Ren, eyes squeezed tightly shut in sleep, with his head and one paw draped over my leg.

I whispered, "Ren. Wake up. My leg is asleep."

He didn't budge.

I sat up and shoved his body lightly. "Come on, Ren. Move!"

He growled softly but stayed put.

"Ren! I mean it! *Moove!*" I shook my leg and shoved him harder.

He finally blinked open his eyes, yawned a giant, toothy tiger yawn, and then rolled off my leg and onto his side.

Standing up, I shook out my quilt, folded it, and tucked it into the bag. I also stamped out the ashes from the fire to make sure nothing was still burning.

"Just so you know, I *hate* camping," I complained loudly. "I'm not so much appreciating that there's no bathroom out here. 'Nature calls' while walking in the jungle is on my list of least favorite things. You tigers, and men in general, have it so much easier than us girls."

I gathered up the empty bottles and wrappers and put them into the pack. The last thing I picked up was the yellow rope.

The tiger just sat there observing me. I decided to give up the pretense that I was the one leading him and stowed the rope away in the pack.

"Okay, Ren. I'm ready. Where are we heading off to today?"

Turning, he stalked off into the jungle again. He weaved his way around trees and undergrowth, over rocks and across small streams. He didn't seem to be in a hurry, and he even stopped for a break every once in a while, as if knowing I needed one. Now that the sun was out, the jungle was becoming quite steamy, so I took off my long-sleeved shirt and tied it back around my waist.



The jungle was very green and had a peppery kind of fragrance, much different than the forests of Oregon. The large deciduous trees were sparse and had graceful, willowy branches. The leaves were an olive-green color rather than the deep greens of the evergreens I was used to. The bark was dark gray and rough to the touch; where cracks formed, the bark peeled away and sloughed off in thin, flaky layers.

Flying squirrels leapt from tree to tree, and we often startled grazing deer. Smelling a tiger, they quickly bounced away on springy legs. I watched Ren to see his reaction, but he ignored them. I noticed another common tree that was more moderate in size and also had a papery bark, but where the bark split on this one, a sticky, gummy resin dripped down the trunk. I leaned against one to pick a pebble out of my shoe and spent the next hour trying to peel the goo off my fingers.

I'd just gotten it off when we weaved through a particularly dense undergrowth of tall grasses and bamboo and sent a flock of colorful birds into flight. I was so startled that I backed into another sap tree and got sticky sap all over my upper arm.

Ren stopped at a small stream. I pulled out a bottle of water and drank it all down. It was nice to have less weight in the backpack, but I was concerned about where I would get water from after my supply ran out. I supposed I could drink from the same stream as Ren, but I would put that off for as long as possible, knowing that my body wouldn't handle it as well as his.

I sat down on a rock and searched for another energy bar. I ate half of one and gave Ren the other half, plus another one. I knew I could survive on that many calories, but I was pretty sure Ren couldn't. He'd have to hunt soon.

Opening a pocket of Mr. Kadam's backpack, I found a compass. I pushed it into the pocket of my jeans. There was still money, the traveling papers, more water bottles, a first aid kit, bug spray, a

candle, and a pocketknife, but no cell phone, and my personal cell phone was missing.

Strange. Could Mr. Kadam have known that I would end up in the jungle? I thought about the man who looked like Mr. Kadam standing by the truck right before it was stolen and wondered aloud, "Did he *want* me to get lost out here?"

Ren wandered over to me and sat down.

"No," I said, looking into the animal's blue eyes. "That doesn't make any sense either. What reason could he possibly have for flying me all the way to India just to get me lost in the jungle? He couldn't have known you would lead me in here or that I'd follow you. He's not the type to deceive anyway."

Ren gaze shifted to the ground as if *he* felt guilty.

"I guess Mr. Kadam is just a really well-prepared Boy Scout."

After a brief rest, Ren got up again, walked off a few paces, and turned around to wait for me. Complaining, I dragged myself off the rock, and followed along behind him. Pulling out the bug spray, I gave my limbs a good spritz and squirted some on Ren for good measure. I laughed when he wrinkled his nose and a big tiger sneeze shook his body.

"So, Ren, where are we going? You act like you have a destination in mind. Personally, I'd like to get back to civilization. So if you could find us a town, I'd be most appreciative."

He continued to lead me on a trail that only he could see for the rest of the morning and into the early afternoon.

I checked my compass often and figured out that we were traveling eastward. I was trying to calculate how many miles we'd walked when Ren burrowed between some bushes. I followed him to find a small clearing on the other side.

With great relief, I saw a small hut that sat right in the middle of

the clearing. Its curved roof was covered with rows of canes tied close together that draped over the top of the structure like a blanket. Stringy fibers, tied into intricate knots, lashed large bamboo poles together to make walls, and the cracks were thatched with dried grasses and clay.

The hut was surrounded by a barrier of loose stones piled on top of each other to create a short wall about two feet high. The stones were covered in thick, verdant moss. In front of the hut, thin panels of stone were affixed to the wall and were painted with an indecipherable assortment of symbols and shapes. The shelter's doorway was so tiny that an average-sized person would have to bend over to enter. There was a line of clothing flapping in the wind, and a small flourishing garden was planted on the side of the home.

We approached the rock wall, and just as I was stepping over, Ren leapt over the barrier next to me. "Ren! You scared the stuffing out of me! Make a noise first or something, would you?"

We approached the small hut, and I steeled myself to knock on the tiny door, but then I hesitated, looking at Ren. "We need to do something about you first." I took the yellow rope out of my backpack and walked over to a tree on the side of the yard. He followed me haltingly. I beckoned him closer. When he finally came close enough, I slipped the rope through his collar and tied the other end to a tree. He didn't look happy.

"I'm sorry, Ren, but we can't have you loose. It would scare the family. I promise I'll be back as soon as I can."

I began walking over to the small house, but then froze in my tracks when I heard a quiet male voice behind me say, "Is this *really* necessary?"

Turning around slowly, I saw a handsome young man standing directly behind me. He looked young, in his early twenties. He was taller than me by a head and had a strong, well-developed trim body that was clothed in loose white cotton garments. His long-sleeved shirt

was untucked and carelessly buttoned, revealing a smooth, well-built golden-bronze chest. His lightweight pants were rolled at the ankles, emphasizing his bare feet. Glossy black hair swept away from his face and curled slightly at the nape of his neck.

His eyes were what riveted me the most. They were my tiger's eyes, the same deep cobalt blue.

Reaching out a hand, he spoke. "Hello, Kelsey. It's me, Ren."

