

THREE  
WAYS



TO  
DISAPPEAR

A NOVEL

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## QUINN

IN THE YEAR AFTER MARCUS DIED, their mother stopped loving people, one after another. Her minister, her tennis coach, her friends. Daddy. On a day dripping with the end of the monsoon, she clicked shut the brass latches on her daughters' suitcases and supervised as Ravindra loaded them into the car. In the courtyard, beneath the peepal tree, Daddy clutched the girls to his chest. Quinn, at eleven, was the responsible one; Sarah, at eight, the remnant twin: widowed by Marcus when he died, if *widowed* was the word for it, which it wasn't. There was no word for it. Thin mud soaked their shoes as he kissed their cheeks and begged them not to forget him. It was a terrible thing to hear him say because it opened up the possibility that they could. His voice had gone high with pain, which embarrassed Quinn for him. She didn't think men were supposed to feel that much.

Mother pulled the girls away, leaving their father to stand alone in the filtered sunlight, arms dangling at his sides as if he didn't know how they operated. Daddy was a doctor, the reason they lived in India, and India, according to Mother, was the reason Marcus was dead. Daddy's mouth curled down, and he cried silently as his daughters watched. Behind him, Ayah wept, rhythmic and soft like singing. Beyond Ayah, the watchman stood: the courtyard a chessboard, the adults the game pieces isolated in their separate squares. Ayah's weeping turned ragged, and Quinn and Sarah ran and clung to her until Mother pried their fingers from Ayah's damp turquoise sari

and pushed the girls, stumbling and crying, into the car. Their shoes muddied the floor mats, but Quinn didn't care.

Ravindra opened the wrought iron gate and nosed the car into the inchoate, horn-honking flow of Delhi traffic. In the back seat, Quinn turned around and watched their home grow smaller. Before it vanished altogether, she raised her hand to it and said goodbye. Goodbye to everything and everyone and everywhere. Goodbye to Daddy. To Ayah. To every friend, enemy, household staff member, shopkeeper, schoolteacher, gymnastics instructor, swimming coach. It seemed easy for Mother: She had shut down her heart. But she still loved her girls. The proof was that she took them with her.

The other proof was that she hadn't believed Quinn when she tried to confess her role in what had happened to Marcus. Quinn said the words, but Mother had let them fall to her bedroom floor, where they scuttled under the bed and vanished. Which meant that the secret was still Quinn's to carry. She had spent a long time considering the consequences before she told Mother what she'd done, but this possibility had never occurred to her.

"Remember, young ladies. Always be good," Ravindra said at the airport curb, his eyes streaming. Sarah and Quinn hugged him hard. They cried. But when Mother told them to leave him, they left, dutiful girls. They boarded an enormous jet and flew west across India, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey. Across all of Europe, to Paris. Over the ultramarine Atlantic Ocean and down the Eastern Seaboard to New York. From there to Louisville, Kentucky, the town where Mother had grown up. They were leaving their unhappiness as far behind them as the planet would allow.

Quinn thought she felt it happen. When the plane lifted off from the Delhi runway, she felt an invisible force push her body back into the seat and flow through her, a tide running in the direction of India and the ground. So Mother was right: It *was* possible to leave things behind, events and stories and history. With a sense of relief, as the

plane shuddered around her, she lifted up her secret and offered it to the tide. She would go to America, and she would be free.

She was twenty-eight years old on the day she stopped believing in this magic. Twenty-eight and bare-bellied on an examining table, her husband's fingers interlaced with her own. The ultrasound tech ran a wand over her midsection, and in a haze of black and gray, the two children inside her revealed their identities: a boy and a girl, just like Marcus and Sarah. Sarah was twenty-five at the time. Marcus was still seven, if he was anything at all.

As she looked at the hazy images of the children inside her, she felt it again: the weight of the plane lifting off and pushing her down. And she knew then that distance and years were nothing, that no matter what their mother said, their histories traveled with them, stitched into their DNA.

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Peacock blue, she thought at first, but that was wrong. Mineral blue, like larimar. A sky color.

On a stool in front of Quinn, her son kicked his feet. It was the day before Nick and Alaina turned seven, and he was sitting for his portrait, to match the one of his sister that Quinn had completed that morning. Quinn's eyes wanted to linger on the curve and color of his peachy little cheek, to slow everything down. She wasn't ready for the twins to be seven. She had known it since the day of that ultrasound: She would never be ready for them to reach this age.

"How come you're using pastels instead of real paint?" Nick asked. By "real paint," he meant acrylics. In art school, Quinn had loved oils, but she hadn't allowed them into her studio since the day she'd learned she was pregnant. Too many noxious fumes in the paint thinners and brush cleaners: bad for the babies.

"I want to get you down fast so you don't have to sit so long," she said. The cerulean blue of his T-shirt reflected into Nick's eyes, which

were a cool, deep hue, nearly periwinkle, pebbled with white. She touched oil pastel to paper to add the reflected color, just a couple of tiny arcs. Barely there at all.

The work absorbed her as it always did. She registered only vaguely the aroma of applewood smoke that meant Pete was heating the gas grill on the deck below. Giggles from the twins' room meant Alaina had commandeered her auntie Sarah, who was back in Louisville between reporting assignments. Sarah had come for a meal and to spend the night; Alaina had brokered the latter part of that deal. Quinn paused for a moment to listen. They were arguing playfully over whether their card game should be called Crazy Eights or Crazy Aunts. Sarah was advocating for the latter.

“What kind of cake are you making?” Nick asked.

“Chocolate with chocolate frosting. Just like you asked for.” She stepped back to assess the drawing. Getting close, although she wanted to do a little more around his mouth and nose. So many complicated curves in that part of the face.

“Mom? Can we be done?”

“Sure, kiddo. You did great.” Before she finished the sentence, he shot out the door, eager to fill Alaina in on the proceedings of the past half hour, no doubt. “Twin summit” was the family term for this mandatory briefing after every separation. “Like heads of state,” Pete had once said as he and Quinn stood watching their children, bemused.

Quinn had begun straightening her studio when Sarah ambled in. “My services were no longer needed,” she said, nodding toward the room across the hall. She straddled the stool and twined her long legs around it, giving the effect of a rider on horseback. “So my last assignment didn’t go so well.”

“No? Where were you?”

Sarah made an impatient noise. “Crappy little dictatorship. Continent beginning with the letter A.” Sometimes she answered

questions that way, to avoid scaring her family, Quinn assumed. “I was doing a series on government reforms to help with the refugee crisis. It all looked pretty impressive. I filed a long story about how things were turning a corner, the aid initiatives were working, et cetera. But the day I’m supposed to leave, all the flights get canceled because of a coup attempt, so I come back to the city. On the way, something tells me to stop by one of the sites where I’d been reporting. And it’s gone.”

Quinn stopped cleaning and tried to gauge her sister’s expression. “Gone? Like a massacre?”

“Gone, like it never existed. Poof. They’d struck the whole damned camp like a movie set.” Sarah dismounted the stool and paced to the window. “I’m out there with my driver, walking around this empty field, and the only things I’m seeing are some tent stakes and a bunch of empty Pepsi cans. And I’m realizing I’ve been played. And then my so-called government liaison shows up, and the next thing I know, I’m being detained.”

“Holy hell, Sarah.” Quinn settled her hips against her worktable and glanced involuntarily at the door, but the Lego noises coming from the bedroom said the twins were otherwise occupied.

Sarah peered out between the mullions like a prisoner. “They took my cell phone and laptop and parked me in this hotel room with a guard outside my door. In the middle of the night, I hear a scratching at my window, and it’s two guys I know, journalists, and we sneak out of there to this little dirt-track airfield and take a puddle jumper to the next country.”

Quinn blanched. “What would have happened if they’d caught you?”

“By that point, the government had bigger things to worry about than me.”

This *Year of Living Dangerously* stuff: It knotted Quinn’s stomach. “You must have been terrified.”

Sarah turned around. “I’m pissed, is what I am. That”—she

glanced at the doorway and lowered her voice—“that fucking little dictator used me as a mouthpiece. Turned us all into his propaganda whores.”

Quinn wiped her hands on a paper towel. “It’s not your fault. He set you up.”

“But who’s to say this is the first time? Every time I’ve gotten access to some site or some person who was supposedly off-limits, maybe it was the same thing. And the damage is done. The stories have already run.”

“You can retract them.”

Sarah shrugged one shoulder. “People remember the story. They never remember it got retracted. Anyway, that’s it for me. I’m done.”

“What do you mean, ‘done’?”

“Done. With journalism.”

“Because of one story? That’s a little impulsive even for you.”

“Because of that story, and the one before it, and the one before that. Like the boy soldiers this summer. People read a story, and the next day it’s forgotten. Nobody wants follow-up. Nobody cares. Or at least that’s what the people in charge of the budgets believe.”

Or they care, but they feel helpless, so they look away. Quinn considered the set of her sister’s mouth. “You’re shedding a lot of layers these days,” she said. Sarah’s divorce had been final less than a year. It had been a short marriage, but still, it had exacted a toll.

“You know me. I don’t like to mess around.”

Quinn recognized that breezy tone: a classic Sarah deflection. “It’s hard to imagine you without journalism. I’m really sorry,” Quinn said, and for Sarah’s sake, she wanted to mean it, but she couldn’t. No more wondering when she’d get the phone call saying her sister had been killed on assignment. “So you’re coming back home, then?”

Sarah turned, planted her hands on the windowsill, and squinted up into the walnut tree. She was tall and blond like Quinn, but Sarah spilled over with half-contained energy. The way she walked, rangy



and loose. People watched her wherever she went, a fact she never seemed to register. “Actually, I got a job.”

“Really! Where?” The local newspaper, Quinn hoped.

“India.”

Quinn dropped a tray of pastels, sending sticks of pigment skidding across the floor. She knelt to gather them and came up clutching gaudy fistfuls. “Why would you do that? Why would you go back there?”

“I’ll be doing media work for a conservation NGO. Getting their story out. Fundraising. Whatever they need me to do.” As if that were what Quinn had asked. “I’ll be in Sawai Madhopur,” Sarah added. “Ranthambore.”

“Ranthambore,” Quinn said. “Tigers?”

Sarah nodded.

“You always did love the big cats.” Quinn recognized the expression on her sister’s face: full of the future, in love with the next thing. It stung her that Sarah seemed perfectly content to remain a special guest star in the twins’ lives. She didn’t know how they idolized her, how they imagined her life the way some people imagined the lives of celebrities. “What the hell are you doing, Sarah?”

“I’m going where I’m needed.”

“You think *we* don’t need you?”

Sarah looked almost amused at that. She spread her arms to encompass the modest but lovely 1920s bungalow, the good husband making dinner downstairs, the two perfect children in the next room. The whole package: That was how it must look to her. “There’s a crisis going on.”

“There’s always a crisis somewhere. Did you ever once think about getting a normal job like a normal person? Like, here in the States?”

“How are the States any more normal than the rest of the world?”

Quinn smacked the pastels onto her worktable. “You think I’m

small, don't you? Living my small little life with my small little family while you're out there risking your life and saving the world."

Sarah laughed. "Come on, Quinnie."

The twins appeared in the doorway. "Auntie Sarah, are you going to go live in India?" Nick asked.

Sarah scooped him up in a hug. "I am!" she exclaimed, as if it were the best news in the world. "But not till January, so we still have three whole months together."

"How far away is India?"

"Do you have a world map? I'll show you." And the three of them disappeared into the twins' room until Pete called up to say dinner was ready.

At the table, the talk was all India. "Will you get to pet tigers?" Nick asked.

"If I petted a tiger, it would probably eat me for dinner."

"Whoa!" Alaina laughed through a mouthful of chicken. "Don't do that."

"I won't. I promise."

Pete said something about the guy he worked with from Bangalore at the tech start-up. Nobody mentioned the DeV Vaughan family history, or the years that would likely pass before the twins saw Sarah again. It was all just pleasant table talk.

After dinner, the children played with Sarah until Quinn sent them into Pete's office to say good night. He turned away from his monitor and scooped up Alaina, then Nick, for a hug and kiss. "Almost finished," he said to Quinn, turning back to his database as she ushered the twins from the room. When she and Sarah said good night at eleven, Pete was still clackety-clacking away at the keys. She went to bed and turned off the lights.

Later, she woke to the sound of Nick's coughing. Pete lay next to her. She hadn't heard him come in.

In the twins' room, light seeped in, dim and blue, around the

edges of the blinds. On the nightstand, the digital clock read 2:15. She touched her son's cheek. "You okay, buddy?"

He nodded, covering a cough. She dosed him with the albuterol inhaler, waited, had him blow into the peak flow meter. Seventy percent, middle of the yellow zone. They sat up together on his bed, her back to the wall. Nick leaned against her, dozing between fits of coughing. She ran her hand over his silky hair.

"Mom?" he murmured.

She kissed his head. "Yeah, sweetie?"

"You grew up in India, didn't you?"

"Till I was eleven."

"What was it like?"

"Oh," she said. "Packed."

"You mean crowded?"

"Yes, but ... more like being inside a great big kaleidoscope. Everywhere you looked, there were a million things to see. Beautiful bright colors. People. A million things going on all at once."

"Like that time we went to the carnival?"

"A lot like that."

Across the room, Alaina slept on her back, arms flung over her head.

Nick fell quiet, his forehead wrinkling as he tried to puzzle something out. "Mom? Are you Indian or American?"

"I'd say I'm American."

"What's Auntie Sarah?"

She smiled. "Auntie Sarah is a citizen of the world."

His readings stayed in the yellow zone. Just another interrupted night. At five o'clock, the meter showed 82 percent—back in the green—and he drifted into a sleep that held. Quinn slipped back to bed.

At seven, she pulled her blond curls into a messy ponytail and stumbled into the kitchen, where she found Sarah rummaging through cupboards, her duffel by the door. It was still dark out. The windows reflected back the overhead lights.

“In the freezer,” Quinn said.

Sarah threw her a glance. “You okay? You look like hell.” She pulled open the freezer, came up with a bag of Italian roast, and thumped the door shut.

“Nick was up coughing. He’s still asleep.”

“Sorry. I’ll be quiet.”

When the coffee finished brewing, they stood together cradling hot mugs of it, hips propped against the counter. It was a family trait, standing when other people would sit. “Hey,” Quinn said. “I’m sorry about that thing I said yesterday.”

Sarah glanced at her curiously. “Which thing?”

“About you thinking my life is small.”

“I don’t think it *is* small,” Sarah said. “It fits you perfectly.”

Quinn squeezed her gritty eyes shut. “God! Can you hear yourself?”

“Aw, Quinnie.” Sarah set her mug on the counter and cuffed Quinn lightly on the shoulder. “We’re different people. So what? I got a job I’m excited about. Can’t you be happy for me? Just a teeny bit?” She held up her palms and peeked between them. “Pretty please? Just that much?”

Quinn laughed in spite of herself. It irked her. Sarah would do exactly as she pleased, so why did she want Quinn’s blessing? It seemed greedy. Yet some tender spot inside her was grateful for the request. Sarah was not one to ask for things.

She considered her sister’s laughing, hopeful expression. Sarah was so elusive to her, always had been: first because she was a twin, then because she was grieving, then because she was gone. “All right, you,” she said, because what else could she say? “Do what you want. Go save those tigers.”

Sarah grinned. “You’re the best.” She picked up her mug for a last gulp of coffee and set it in the sink. Then she gave Quinn a surprising kiss on the cheek, and she was gone.

## SARAH

THE WATER BEARER was staring at her breasts.

For the five-hour train ride from Delhi on the Golden Temple Mail, Sarah had dressed modestly, as she always did when in transit: a purple-and-gold gypsy skirt, sturdy ankle boots, a short brown jacket over a white T-shirt woven thick enough to conceal any trace of her bra. Eleven years as an itinerant journalist had taught her never to overlook that last part. She was a traveler, not a tourist. But she was traveling alone, and wherever she went in the world—including this small, dusty platform at the railway station in Sawai Madhopur—certain men saw that fact as an opening.

“*Bhaiya*,” she began, addressing the teenaged water bearer politely, “do you have a sister?” He pushed an overhang of hair off his pimply forehead and said he did. She asked in Hindi, “Do you like it when men stare at *her* breasts?” then collected her bags and walked away. She knew how to tell men off in twelve languages. In Hindi, the most direct way to say it was *Jao*, which meant simply, *Go away*. Her favorite was Italian: *Lasciami in pace, maiale*. It sounded beautiful rolling off the tongue. It meant: *Leave me alone, pig*.

She also knew how to say, “Wait—I have a condom.” It had come in handy from time to time.

Sawai Madhopur. She’d been here when she was seven, with Marcus and Quinn and Mother and Daddy, visiting the Ranthambore tiger reserve. They’d made their way together down this very platform

as a family, intact and squabbling amiably. Three months later, Marcus was dead.

And now here she was, a week into the futuristic-sounding year 2000, starting her life over in the land of her birth. So much had changed since she'd been here, and so little. India was as thoroughly, soaked-to-the-roots India as she remembered it, only with the addition, in certain quarters, of cell phones and the internet.

Quinn had surprised Sarah by giving her blessing, however reluctantly, for Sarah to come back here. Mother had tried to talk her out of it, relying on her usual bag of tricks: guilt, hurt feelings, icy withdrawal. Somehow, in Mother's twenty years as executive assistant to the head of a law firm, she had failed to acquire effective arguing skills. But Sarah had been traveling since she was twenty-two, and there was nothing to keep her in the States. She had business to attend to here, a new mission to replace her old career, even if it was only half-formed in her mind. Things would become clearer, she was sure, as she settled in and committed herself to one purpose, one dot on the global atlas.

Her suitcase wheel began to stutter. Glancing down at it, she nearly crashed into a man. She smiled a brief apology without making eye contact, but he said her name, a question, and she looked up into his face: a white man, older, so worn and grizzled that it took her a second to recognize him. "William Amesbury." She extended her hand and shook his warmly. She'd expected someone much younger, but of course she was picturing him as he'd been in his nature documentary days. "I'm a huge fan. I grew up on your films."

He said a few words of welcome and smiled briefly with half his mouth. Maybe he thought she'd just called him old. Or maybe something had happened to him, a stroke, an illness. It might explain why he hadn't made any new documentaries in the past half-dozen years, why he was now working in obscurity for a conservation NGO. The journalist in her wanted to ask. She filed away the questions: things to find out later.

From the railway station, William steered the silver Tata Sumo SUV over the viaduct, past low buildings and billboards, to a neighborhood of two- and three-story apartment complexes intermixed with small houses. He pulled up to a gate and parked. She would be living just above him in the block of flats. Her younger self couldn't have imagined she'd end up as William Amesbury's upstairs neighbor.

"Let's get you settled in," he said. "You must be ready to drop." But then the gate swung open, and a lanky woman in an elegant beige salwar kameez galloped to his door. Geeta Banerjee, the head of Tiger Survival: Sarah recognized her from the magazine articles she'd read while researching her new employer.

"Quickly. We must hurry." Geeta scrambled into the back seat. "There's been a tiger accident. A man dead."

A tiger accident. In the Indian vernacular, it meant a tiger had attacked a human.

"You're joking." William reversed onto the road. "Which village?"

"Vinyal."

"Sod's law." William navigated through an intersection, adding for Sarah's benefit, "It's one of the less welcoming, shall we say, of the district's villages."

"Do you mean violence?" she asked. "Or just the cold shoulder?"

Geeta glanced at Sarah. "Hard to say, given that we represent the interests of the killer." She didn't introduce herself.

The drive took them far out into the countryside, to a village of low whitewashed buildings scattered over a nearly treeless plain. A crowd had gathered in front of a mud-and-thatch house. Some of the villagers stared openly at Sarah as she approached, presumably because she was white, and a stranger. But for Geeta they stepped back.

So no violence, at least for the moment.

In front of the house, a woman knelt, keening, over the body of a thin man. A rag covered his face and a blanket draped his body,

leaving visible his dust-cloaked bare feet. Three small children clung to the woman, crying, and a teenaged boy sat on the ground, staring at nothing, his oversized hands dangling between his knees. The tiger had eaten the man's buttock and thigh, judging from the bloodstained blanket. Sarah caught a glimpse of the man's throat: purpled but intact. The tiger had crushed his windpipe without breaking the skin.

A tall man in Western clothing approached. Sarah recognized him as Sanjay Prakash, the third Tiger Survival staffer. "I spoke with some of the men," he reported in a low voice. He glanced at Sarah, but again they didn't bother with introductions. "It's Sunil. The one we caught poisoning the water holes last dry season. He slept in his field last night as usual, to protect his crop from antelope and boar. When the other men woke to start a fire and boil water for tea, he didn't join them. His son found his body, dragged a little way from where he'd been sleeping."

Sarah glanced at the boy with the dangling hands and vacant stare.

"He was wearing a white *dhoti kurta*, sleeping on a white blanket," Sanjay said. "The tiger probably mistook him for a bullock. Ninety percent chance the tiger hadn't eaten in days. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been out here in the first place."

So the attack hadn't been the action of a surprised or threatened tiger, as Sarah had imagined, but of one who'd made a fundamental error in its choice of prey. Geeta and William exchanged a look. "One of the subadults from the Semli Valley," William ventured. "They're twenty months. Just the age when they start to disperse. They've no experience. No territory."

Except that now this tiger had discovered that humans made easy prey.

A murmur ran through the crowd as the widow began to speak. "She says the tiger who did this should be killed," Sanjay said. "Everyone comes to save the tiger, but who was there to save her



husband? She says she and her children are as good as dead now, but no one cares.”

How many times had Sarah documented some variation on this scene? Natural disaster, war—the cause didn’t matter; the outcome was the same. It bothered her not to be scribbling down notes, shooting pictures. She didn’t know what her role was in this situation, and she felt like a voyeur. She approached the smallest child, a girl of four or five, and crouched before her. “*Aap ke naam kya hai?*” Sarah asked gently. *What’s your name?*

The girl snuffled. “Piya.”

“Piya,” Sarah murmured. “Good girl, Piya.” The girl thrust both hands into Sarah’s blond curls and stared, openmouthed, till her mother stepped forward to take her. Piya gazed back at Sarah over her mother’s shoulder as they walked away.

“I’ll talk to the sarpanch,” Sanjay said.

“Tell him we’ll do what we can to help,” Geeta said. She nodded to William and Sarah. “Come on. We’re going. I’ll drive.”

They rode in silence down the dirt track heading out of the village. Fields of yellow-flowering mustard stretched away on either side. Who knew what animals were sheltering in that chest-high crop. Ground squirrels, spotted owlets, herds of blackbuck antelope. A lone tiger, invisible.

“Poisoned the water holes. Bah,” Geeta said. She glanced at Sarah in the rearview mirror. “The forest guards had to fill them in with a backhoe. God knows how many animals died of thirst.” She grimaced. “So the man who tried to bag a tiger got bagged instead. I guess you could call that justice.”

William shot her a look, and she raised her chin. “I’m sorry for his family,” she said. “Truly, I am. Padma, his wife—obviously, she’s distraught. She’s in a terrible position. In theory, the government will compensate her for her loss, but it won’t be much, if it comes through at all.” She shook her head. “I promised her we’d do what we could.

But I cannot feel sorry there's one less poacher in the world."

"Geeta," William said reprovingly. It surprised Sarah to hear him use her name like that, no honorific, despite the fact that she was his boss. Maybe it was because he was British. An Indian would have called her "Geeta Ma'am," and Sarah, as her employee, intended to follow suit.

Geeta growled. "You're right. If anyone needs to be eaten, it's the bloody dealers, not the poor sods like Sunil who do the dirty work for the price of a secondhand motorbike. You think I'm joking about the dealers," she added for Sarah's benefit. "Do this work for a few years and see if you don't feel the same."

Sarah leaned forward between the seats. "What will happen to the tiger?"

"Officially, nothing, unless there's another attack on a human. It's called a 'tiger accident' for good cause. There's no reason to assume it will happen again." Geeta steered around a swaying camel cart piled high with firewood. "But the widow wants revenge. And God knows how many men in that village are listening to her say the tiger should die. And thinking how it could have been them instead of our friend Sunil."

She flicked the wipers to knock dust off the windshield. "Well. This was not quite the introductory meeting I'd planned." She sketched out Tiger Survival's mission. Protecting tigers mostly involved getting humans to leave them and their habitat alone. For the villagers, that meant reducing their dependence on the park's resources. William headed up lake-building efforts. Sanjay served as resident naturalist, educator, and jack-of-all-trades. He hailed from Sawai, so he had community connections and the trust of the villagers. He also served as translator; the dialects changed from village to village. "I'm afraid my role has become mainly administrative," Geeta said. "My most important task is to consult with Project Tiger officials in Delhi on matters of policy and with the police on anti-poaching efforts."

She didn't mention what Sarah had read about her in a

conservation magazine: that she'd been more or less born to the work. She came from a prominent Calcutta family, her father a well-known naturalist who'd spent his life advocating for tigers long before most people recognized their endangerment. After completing her education at Cambridge, Geeta had followed the same path. She was famously relentless in her work. She'd been called authoritarian, the interviewer noted. Authoritative, she'd countered. That exchange had made Sarah like her.

Now Geeta glanced over her shoulder. "Rules and regulations. We do not interfere with anything inside the park. If we stumble across a poacher setting a trap, we radio the forest guards. If we find a tiger in a trap, we radio the forest guards. If we see an animal in trouble in any manner that is not human inflicted, we leave it strictly alone. Nature is the boss inside the park, and what nature doesn't manage, the park director does. We have excellent relations with him, and this is how we keep those relations good. We respect his territory. We do not interfere. Understood?"

"Understood," Sarah said.

The road curved as it entered Sawai Madhopur, with its collection of low brick buildings and billboards. Geeta waved a hand. "You see the problem, of course."

"Population," William said. "And proximity to the park."

Sarah nodded. She'd read about the hordes of school groups and weekend sightseers, the tourist hotels, the villages drawing on the park for water and firewood and fodder grass. It added up to a ready-made disaster, and the park directors, along with nongovernmental agencies like their own, could hold it off for only so long. "It's the reality of our work, unfortunately," William said. "We all cope in our own ways."

"Stubbornness is a useful tool," Geeta said.

"As are a few sharp edges," William added. "And a touch of denial."

Geeta stopped in front of their building and killed the engine. "Well, Sarah. What else is there to say." She drummed her fingers on

the steering wheel, frowning. “Ah, yes. Welcome to Sawai Madhopur.”

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Thirty hours of travel and then the tiger accident. Sarah lay in bed but couldn't sleep. A day like that deserved a wake of its own—drinks with friends and a chance to say, or not say, the obvious things: that being a poor man in rural India was a life-threatening occupation. That being a tiger trying to make a living in this decimated world was at least equally dangerous.

She fidgeted beneath the sheets, her arms on top of the covers. It was a habit she'd developed in her traveling years. No one had ever actually invaded her room at night, but you never knew, and if your arms were tucked in, you had no way to fight them off. She wondered if Geeta slept with her arms out. It seemed a pretty good bet that once or twice in her decades of conservation work, Geeta had found it necessary to run off some drunken bureaucrat who'd decided to pay her a visit in the middle of the night. Or maybe her upper-class status insulated her from behavior like that. Still, Sarah could picture storklike Geeta sticking her long neck out the door, peering down over her beaky nose at some weaving, hopeful suitor and flapping her bony arm to shoo him away so she could settle herself, with much folding of legs and rustling of nightgown, back into bed.

She got up and made a cup of tea. Sanjay had arrived at their building around dark to visit William. Sarah could hear their voices murmuring downstairs now. She wished William had invited her down, but maybe it wasn't going to be like that. Or maybe it would eventually, but not yet. These things were delicate. She couldn't just assume she'd be welcome in any conversation. In her reporter/photographer days, she'd never had to stare down an empty evening. They'd all gathered in the hotel bar at the end of the day and swapped stories over beer.

The temperature had dropped sharply since the sun went down. She dressed in jeans and a sweater, stepped outside, trod lightly on the

wooden steps down to ground level, and looked around the courtyard for a place to sit. A bench stood empty on the front porch, between William's flat and the landlord's, but she didn't want to claim that spot till she got the lay of the land. Someone had left a low stack of bricks next to the courtyard wall: That would do. She sat, the cold instantly seeping through the denim of her jeans. Ivory light spilled from William's front window, and she could see the two of them in there, saying their goodbyes.

William's door creaked open, and Sanjay stepped through, laughing at some parting exchange, but the night air took his breath in a wordless exclamation as he closed the door. He hunched his shoulders and crossed the graveled courtyard toward her.

She said hello, and he jumped, not seeing her. She stood, apologizing, and he namaskared and introduced himself.

"I know who you are," she said, and she saw that her words startled him, as if she'd just announced she could read his thoughts. "I recognize you," she clarified. "From the village."

"So. Sarah DeVaghan." He recovered himself with a smile. His black hair shone in the buzzing streetlight. "What on earth makes you want to sit outside on such a cold night?"

She had embarrassed him just now. She thought she owed him an honest answer. "I'm seeking clarity."

"On a stack of bricks? I've never found it there, myself. Rats and snakes—now, that's a different story."

She took a hop-step away from the pile. "I've been wondering when it's going to hit, that's all. The fact that I'm here for the long haul."

"*Achchha*," he said, a multipurpose word that meant *okay* or *I understand*. "You were a journalist. Always on the go." His breath clouded white.

"Exactly. And now I'm not." She liked him, found him familiar somehow. Maybe they had met before. Maybe when she was seven,

when her family had visited the park.

They mounted the front steps to the porch, and though Sanjay left room for her on the wooden bench by the door, she chose instead to stand facing him, hips balanced on the porch railing. The streetlight threw her shadow across him. “What about you? Have you lived in Sawai all your life?”

“Oh, yes. I’m a mud hut—I’m made of this place; you can’t move me. Actually, I did go to university in Mumbai and stayed on for a few years, working for the Bombay Natural History Society, but I came back first chance I got.”

“The BNHS,” she said, impressed. “You must have been at the top of your class.”

He laughed. “Actually, I got my foot in the door there before university. I won an essay contest in senior secondary school. The prize was a spot at a summer conservation institute.”

“So you’re a writer.”

“Not like you are. I’m a devotee of this park. That’s why I left Mumbai. I couldn’t stay away. And of course my family were here, but I would have come back regardless.” He paused. “People say it’s one of the most beautiful places on earth. We’re taking you there tomorrow. You can tell me if you agree.”

“I’ve been here before, actually. As a young girl.”

“Really? Here? So Sawai called you back, too.” He pronounced it *Savai*.

“Ranthambore did.” She hesitated. “I have this recurring dream. I’m standing alone in a thick fog, and I don’t know how to get out. That used to be the whole dream—I was just stuck. But a few months ago, a tiger appeared out of the fog.”

“Very auspicious,” Sanjay said. “Unless it wanted to eat you.”

“No. It wanted me to follow it.”

“And where did this tiger lead you?”

She spread her hands. “Here, I think.”

He laughed. “Let me tell you. You must be Indian, to make such a big decision based on a dream. We’re famous for that sort of nonsense.”

“Really? Most of the Indians I know are very practical.”

“Sixty percent. Maximum seventy. The rest wander about with their heads in the clouds.”

“Then I guess I can stop seeking clarity,” she said. “Looks like I’ve landed in the right place.”

“No doubt about it. You’re made for this country.”

He smiled at her and stood to go. She watched him leave. *Had* they met before? In 1974, India had only just discovered that the tiger had all but vanished from the subcontinent, had only just begun establishing its network of tiger preserves. Her father had decided the family should go have a look. They’d ridden through the park in an open jeep beneath the forest canopy until they came upon a tigress resting in a grove of kulu trees, washing her face. To Sarah’s eyes, she didn’t look endangered at all. In fact, she seemed to be smiling and enjoying her bath. Her head moved in a graceful ellipse, tongue out to wet her wristbone, tongue in when her paw swept over her cheek and around her ear. Sarah wanted to sink her fingers into that soft, thick fur.

The tigress stopped her grooming, her paw halted in midair. She looked directly at Sarah and said, “Hello, you.” Or not that, exactly. The message was languageless but definitely an acknowledgment. The tigress *saw* her, recognized that she existed: not prey, not competitor, just an odd creature passing through her territory—migratory perhaps.

Maybe there had been another jeep there, one with an Indian family in it, Sanjay a boy of ten or so. Or maybe the two of them had sat at adjacent tables on the hotel verandah, watching each other curiously, as children will do. Or maybe in another life. Who knew?

Or maybe she was making the whole thing up because he was good-looking and he clearly liked to play. Her favorite kind of man. She

rested her chin in her hand and smiled, considering the possibilities.

The landlord's door creaked open, and a girl of fourteen or so stepped out. "Hello!" the girl said. "May I join you?"

"Of course! If you don't mind the cold."

"I'm bundled up." She nodded to the shawl wrapped around her shoulders. "I'm Drupti. I was hoping I'd have the chance to meet you. It's very exciting to have a new person in the building. Especially you."

"Why especially me?" Sarah asked. Drupti wore her hair in two long braids. Maybe she was sixteen. Hard to tell.

"Because you're living alone," Drupti said. "In India, it's terribly rare for a woman to be allowed to live alone. It seems quite glamorous."

Sarah laughed. "Nice to meet you, Drupti. You're in ... school?" She didn't want to guess her age wrong.

"Yes, law school, in Jaipur. I'm home on holiday." She laughed at Sarah's reaction. "I'm twenty-one. It's hard for us to tell Westerners' ages, too."

Sarah smiled. "How old do you think *I* am?"

Drupti cocked her head and squinted. "Mmm ... twenty-five?"

"Thirty-three."

"Close," Drupti said. "I'm glad you're here. We've been talking about nothing else for days. And tomorrow, William and Sanjay are taking you to the park, I think. Thin walls," she explained. "It's going to be terribly cold tomorrow; you'll have to wear your warmest clothes. And speaking of which, it really is freezing out here, isn't it? I think I'll go in, but I'm glad I got to meet you. Knock if you need anything; someone's always here." And she disappeared inside.

•

Sarah awoke before dawn to a chilly apartment. She dressed in her warmest clothes and carefully made her way down frost-slicked stairs to the courtyard, where Sanjay and William and their driver waited in an open jeep. The night was black, the air cold as iron, but her



introduction to Ranthambore would proceed according to plan.

On the wind-whipped drive to the park, Sanjay pronounced the cold weather highly auspicious. “The animals will teach us something new today,” he shouted to William and Sarah, who sat in the back seat, wrapped tight in buffalo plaid blankets, eyes watering from the assault of frigid air. The driver—a kind-faced, barrel-chested man named Hari—slowed the jeep only when they turned off the macadam of Ranthambore Road onto the dusty track into the park. The jeep shuddered and snorted white exhaust into the freezing predawn blackness. Around them, hills rose blacker than the sky.

*The Aravalli Hills are the oldest in the world.* So began a passage in a book Sarah had slipped into her pocket as she left her flat. Now she flipped to a dog-eared page and read as best she could by penlight on the bumpy road. *They, along with the Vindhya Mountains, form two spines that define Ranthambore. It is a place of dramatic terrain: cliffs where leopards prowl at dusk, vine-draped ravines where tigers raise their cubs, mirror lakes reflecting summer palaces and temples built a thousand years ago. The ground is dust and stone.*

She glanced up. They had entered thick woods, and on either side of the track, every leaf and twig to a height of three feet glowed ghostly in the headlights, as if the foliage had been doused in bleach. It was dust, she realized, that created the eerie effect: ordinary dust kicked up by every jeep that had passed that way since the last rain.

*On the tawny hillsides, gnarled acacias claw against the landscape, failing to reach the sky. Dhok trees hunker sere and lifeless until the monsoon comes, and then their spindly branches unfurl leaves of transparent green, the first tree in the forest to wither in the heat, the first to revive in the rains. Near the stony nullahs, wild date palms scent the air, and flocks of rose-ringed parakeets pour, crying, across the sky.*

She lowered the book. The wind had died, and the headlights caught a herd of spotted chital deer nibbling sparse grass beneath a fig tree. “My father taught me the concept of camouflage beneath that

very tree,” Sanjay said. “The chital were grazing just as they are now. The white spots on their backs looked like sunlight through leaves.” He turned in his seat. “Please remember, Sarah. Even if you don’t see a tiger today, you can be sure the tiger sees you.” Half aphorism, half consolation, his breath puffing out in white clouds, preparing her for disappointment. But everything seemed a wonder to Sarah. The way the world smelled of ice, of living things pulled in tight. The way the forest creatures came awake when the sky began to gray in the east. Animals rustled and hooted and *krr-krrred*.

The jeep rumbled out of the wood and crested a hill. Rajbagh Lake lay spread out below, its shining black surface exhaling streamers of white mist. In the dark, the water gave up nothing but the liquid reflection of headlights, though Sarah remembered it as a gem of a lake, ringed by reeds and ornamented on its far shore with a summer palace built a thousand years ago.

*Crowning it all is the cliff-top fortress, its millennial ramparts golden at sunrise and late in the day. In its thousand-year history, its seven gates have withstood innumerable sieges, their strategic placement at switchbacks in the steep path rendering them all but impervious to elephants and battering rams. In 1301, when the fortress was under the control of the Rajput king Hammir Singh, it came under siege by the sultan of Delhi, who managed to turn one of Singh’s generals against him. Enticed by the promise of his own kingdom, the traitorous general accomplished from inside the stronghold what armies and elephants could not manage from below. In secret, he raised the orange flag, which the king had decreed was to be flown only in defeat. Seeing the coded sign that all was lost, the five thousand women and children of Ranthambore flung themselves into fire.*

*In the face of this catastrophe, the Rajput king lost all heart and surrendered to the sultan, though not before finding and killing the traitorous general. The execution was utterly insufficient as an act of revenge, but it was the only thing Hammir Singh had left to him.*

*Now the fortress belongs to the tiger.*

Sarah closed the book. Sanjay murmured something to Hari, and they drove on, past a uniformed forest guard who sat on a rock near the lakeshore, peeling an apple with a pocketknife. The headlights caught him, and he pressed his palms together in a long-distance namaskar. Nothing about him suggested that he was afraid of being on foot in the tigers' domain, but even from a distance, Sarah could see that his face bore signs of an old injury: the nose misshapen, the cheekbone caved in.

"It happened last dry season," Sanjay said. "Herders. He and his partner caught them grazing their cattle illegally in the park's core area." He glanced back at Sarah. "He was the lucky one. His partner died from the beating."

Sarah had heard stories like this before. Too many people, too few resources, everything out of balance. The reason NGOs like Tiger Survival existed.

All around, bird chatter rose up amid the bustle of bodies moving in the trees, the blunt sound of feathers against air. Whoever thought the countryside was quiet had never been around birds in the morning. Sanjay identified their calls: white-bellied drongo, Asian paradise flycatcher, rufous-tailed shrike. Sarah sat back and listened, both to learn a few things and to enjoy the cadences of Sanjay's voice, the British cast of his vowels, the *v*'s instead of *w*'s: *jungle warbler*. "When I was a small boy," he said, "I thought the birds sang the stars to sleep. I don't know where I got that idea. My father, probably. He taught political science, but he was a naturalist at heart. He spoiled me for any other kind of work."

A peahen mewed. Night thinned to gray, and Sanjay gestured for Hari to wheel the jeep onto a track leading into the forest. A few dozen yards in, where blackness still held, Sanjay murmured, "*Bas*," and Hari stopped in the middle of the road, killing the engine but leaving the headlights on to illuminate the track.

“Claw marks.” Sanjay pointed to scratches in a tree trunk at the edge of the headlights’ reach. “But he hasn’t been here in three or four days. Maybe today he makes his rounds again.”

Sarah and William exchanged a hopeful glance. She was curious about him. On film, William had always been the narrator. In person, he seemed contained and respectful of Sanjay’s authority in the park. Humble, really, a trait she found surprising and rather endearing.

For forty minutes they waited in the biting air. Sanjay and Hari exchanged a few quiet words about Hari’s children, then fell silent so as not to scare off the animals. The engine ticked intermittently as it cooled. Sarah thought the membranes inside her nose might freeze and shatter. For a time, she listened to the pressured pulsing in her ears to take her mind off her fingertips, burning with chill despite her gloves.

A hoopoe stalked across the road, its headdress of black-tipped feathers swaying. Sanjay handed Sarah his copy of *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. As she read the field guide by the red beam of her penlight, something shifted in the atmosphere to her right.

Without moving, she slid her eyes in that direction. And there he was: a tiger, standing alongside the jeep. She could have reached out and touched him.

In the gray half light, his body blended into the forest like a ghost. He turned his head and looked right into her eyes. Then he stepped past her into the headlights, and Sanjay whispered, “*Tigertigertiger!*” and the four of them rose to their feet. In the light, he was no ghost but a big, glossy male, long and lean, close enough that Sarah could see the individual hairs in his fiery orange coat. His breath turned to smoke as it hit the air. Without taking her eyes off the animal, Sarah raised her camera.

Something about the angle of the tiger’s shoulder seemed eloquent, as if all his power and grace originated there. The backs of his black ears sported white spots that stared back like eyes, then disappeared as he flicked his ears backward to judge the jeep’s

proximity. He had registered their presence, that much was clear, but he had already measured them up and decided they weren't worth bothering about.

He sauntered down the middle of the track, unhurried but purposeful, stopping every few feet to spray his scent on a tree or bush. Twenty feet past the jeep, he reared up and placed his forepaws on a tree trunk, stretching easily six feet up. In profile, his eye glowed amber, as if lit from within. His tail swished the dust as he pulled his claws through the bark, which squealed and groaned under his mauling.

Hari started the engine, and the tiger turned his head, his eyes transforming into an unearthly electric green. He pulled his black lips into a demonic snarl, wrinkling the skin of his nose and cheeks. His long canines gleamed. Then he dropped silently to all fours and disappeared into the trees.

Sanjay turned to Sarah and grasped her hand in victory. "God is smiling on you," he said, and, in fact, so was Sanjay himself. "That was Akbar, the resident male. To see him in your first hour in the park—it's unheard of."

She beamed, crinkling the corners of her eyes. "I'm lucky." But she quickly closed her lips. It was too cold to keep one's teeth exposed for long.

Later that morning, back in her apartment, she thought about that moment. *God is smiling on you*. People didn't usually talk to her that way, but she liked that Sanjay did. Throughout the morning, he had seen everything and known what it meant. Not only did he spot pugmarks—paw prints—from a moving jeep, he could tell how old they were. If dewdrops had fallen into a pugmark from the trees, the track had been made before dawn. Three times, he heard noises that Sarah didn't even register. Once it was a tiger's far-off roar, barely more than a vibration in their chests. Sarah took a photo of him at that moment: one hand in the air for quiet, lips

slightly parted, a searching look on his face.

In the bedroom, she peeled off her clothing, scattering whitish dust onto the tile in an irregular circle, like unbleached flour. It was too cold to shower, so she wiped herself down with a washcloth and dressed as quickly as she could. She figured it was maybe forty-five degrees Fahrenheit in her apartment. The tile floor didn't help matters. Still, she had a space heater and warm clothes, which put her in the privileged class. On the predawn drive to the park, they had passed a farmer wearing a thin *dhoti kurta* and a turban. He clutched a shawl around his shoulders, but his legs and feet were bare to the bitter cold. India was a hard place to live, a hard place to make anything change. A hard place to get past the tragic and the absurd.

She picked up her camera and flipped through the morning's shots. That tiger! She opened up her laptop and wrote up the encounter in an email to Quinn. She wrote one more paragraph, hesitated, deleted it, and pasted it back in:

What hit me was not so much the majesty of the animal but the practicality of it all. For the first time, I understood the tiger as a creature with a job. His work this morning was to patrol his territory, the way a person might start the workday by catching up on email. For the first time in my adult life, I saw a tiger in the wild, and I found myself shocked to discover that he and I have something in common. That the tiger's untamed nature does not exempt him from routine and responsibility. That wildness and freedom are not the same thing.

This was not the way Sarah normally wrote. On assignment, she reported; she didn't interpret. Her editor, Hal, used to say, in the sardonic way of old-school newsmen, "If your mother says she loves

you, check it out.” What he meant was, take nothing at face value. Verify everything, and find a statistic or an official to quote. Do not compare your life to a tiger’s.

But this tiger had looked straight into Sarah’s eyes. The way she saw it, that eye contact gave her permission to write it any way she wanted.

She sent the message and moved to the front room, where she’d placed a few photos in a niche above the low madras plaid couch. A shot of her skydiving. A photo she’d taken of the boy soldiers after their surrender. A faded snapshot of Marcus and her leaping off the back of a sofa, knees bent, feet pedaling the air. They’d linked arms, both of their free arms flinging outward like wings, as if they were one flying creature with two backlit blond heads.

There must have been a reason she had lived and Marcus had died. They both went into the creek that day; they both came down with cholera. But maybe she was made of more resilient stuff, the same quality that had made her the older twin by ten minutes. Or maybe it was Sarah’s fate to cause her brother’s death. They lived in a houseful of adults plus one older sister, yet in the moment she had lured him outside, they had managed to slip beneath the notice of every single person charged with their care. The sheer unlikelihood of that achievement seemed to argue that its outcome was fated.

Or maybe the universe didn’t make it its business to pay attention to naughty seven-year-olds, or to anyone else, for that matter. In her adult life, Sarah had seen plenty of evidence to support that hypothesis. In which case, the adults should have been paying vastly more attention.

She sat down on the low sofa with a pad of notepaper and began composing a classified ad to place in the *Times of India*.

IT WAS 1974, she wrote. WE WERE THREE AMERICAN CHILDREN.  
YOU WERE OUR AYAH.

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