

Tiger's Curse

By

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Dedication

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 hautilly 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 as he 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.

The fact that Lokesh, the raja of a small neighboring kingdom called Bhreenam, had managed to kidnap him was not as shocking as who was sitting beside him: Yesubai, Lokesh's daughter and the prisoner's fiancée, and his 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—you, who are almost family—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 and 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 distainfully 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 his 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 remained 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. He 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 Ren's face, probing, assessing for weakness. Angered to the point of action, he 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, 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 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.

He reached out with his hands to brace himself, but he managed only to scratch feebly on the cold, white tile of the floor. He watched helplessly as both Yesubai and his brother attacked Lokesh, who shoved them both back viciously. Yesubai fell to the ground, hitting her head hard on the dais. He was aware that his brother was near,

overtaken by grief as the life drained from her limp body. Then he was aware of nothing except the pain.

Chapter 1

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.

“Do you like animals?”

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

The lady didn’t really seem to care about my response, and she handed me a posting for a job that would last two weeks.

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
will be provided.

It was for the Circus Maurizio, not a big one like the Ringling Brothers, but 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, six years old, and Samuel, four years old, 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 lady 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 lady didn’t so much as crack a smile. I had no other options so I told her that I would do it, and she gave me a card with an address. She instructed me to be there tomorrow 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 the car 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 the 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 it 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, agave, Vega vanilla, and whey. 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 a cookie, 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 brussel 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.

“Brussel sprouts casserole,” I answered, surprised he could smell anything other than the malodorous casserole.

“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 which 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 clean-up 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 clean-up 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 clean-up, and 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 blanket when I was little. I was really 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 night stand and the two pictures I kept out. One picture was of the three of us: me, mom, and dad at a New Year's celebration. I had just turned twelve. 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 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;

then turned and ran faster. The sound of gentle, padded paws raced along after me, beating in time with my heart.