









# tiger's voyage

by COLLEEN HOUCK



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# SPLINTER

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*For my parents, Bill and Kathy—  
who put off all their adventures  
to raise a brood of seven*



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# forget thee?

by John Moultrie

*Forget thee? If to dream by night and muse on thee by day;  
If all the worship deep and wild a poet's heart can pay;  
If prayers in absence breathed for thee to Heaven's protecting power;  
If winged thoughts that flit to thee a thousand in an hour;  
If busy fancy blending thee with all my future lot—  
If this thou call'st forgetting, thou, indeed, shalt be forgot!*

*Forget thee? Bid the forest-birds forget their sweetest tune;  
Forget thee? Bid the sea forget to swell beneath the moon;  
Bid the thirsty flowers forget to drink the eve's refreshing dew;  
Thyself forget thine own dear land, and its mountains wild and blue.  
Forget each old familiar face, each long-remember'd spot—  
When these things are forgot by thee, then thou shalt be forgot!*

*Keep, if thou wilt, thy maiden peace, still calm and fancy-free,  
For God forbid thy gladsome heart should grow less glad for me;  
Yet, while that heart is still unwon, oh! bid not mine to rove,  
But let it nurse its humble faith and uncomplaining love;  
If these, preserved for patient years, at last avail me not—  
Forget me then; but ne'er believe that thou canst be forgot!*



## PROLOGUE



# blood in the water

Behind the thick glass of his Mumbai penthouse office once again, Lokesh tried to control the incredible rage slowly circling through his veins. Nothing had gone according to plan in the Baiga camp. Even the villagers had turned out to be weak and disloyal. True, he had captured Dhiren, the white tiger-prince, and taken a vital piece of the Damon Amulet from the girl, but he hadn't been able to finish what he'd started.

Breathing deeply to calm his rage, he pressed his fingers together and deliberately tapped them against his bottom lip as he pondered the fight. *They'd possessed special weapons. His underlings had discovered that the weapons were somehow tied to the goddess Durga. Clearly, there was some kind of magic involved, and it wasn't the weak country magic of the tribe.*

Magic was a tool, a gift to be used by those wise enough to understand and manipulate it. A trick of the universe that only a few sought and even fewer could harness. Lokesh had it, and he would use it to bring him even more power. Others thought him evil. He didn't believe in good and evil—only in powerful and powerless. Lokesh was determined to be the former.

*Why Durga? Perhaps the goddess is somehow guiding them.*

Like good and evil, he didn't believe in gods. Faith was a crutch, a convenient way to control the masses who would become mindless slaves, choosing not to use whatever meager intellect they possessed.

Believers sat at home and wept and prayed, prostrating themselves for divine assistance that would never come.

*An intelligent man takes matters into his own hands.* Lokesh frowned as he remembered the girl slipping from his. To her, it must have seemed like he ran. He'd sent in reinforcements, but the idiots had returned empty-handed. The command center had been destroyed. The cameras and video records were missing. The Baiga, the tiger, and the girl were nowhere to be found. It was extremely . . . vexing.

A chime rang as his assistant entered the room. Lokesh listened as the man nervously explained that the tracking device he'd implanted in the prince had been found. The man opened his shaking hand and dropped the smashed remains on the desk. Without a word, Lokesh picked up the broken chip and, using the power of the amulet, threw it and the quivering assistant out of the sixtieth-story window. He listened to the assistant's screams as he dropped floor by floor. Just when the man was about to hit bottom, Lokesh murmured a few words that opened a hole in the ground under his assistant and buried him alive.

Disappointing distractions dealt with, he pulled his hard-won prize from his pocket. Wind whipped through the broken window, and the sun rose higher above the bustling city, casting a beam of light on the freshly acquired fourth piece of the amulet. Soon, he would unite *all* the pieces of the amulet and would finally have the means to accomplish what he'd always dreamed of since he'd learned of the amulet's existence. He knew that the completed amulet would fashion him into something new . . . something . . . more. Something . . . perfect. Though he had deliberately prolonged starting the process and relished the anticipation almost as much as the victory, it was time.

The moment had arrived.

A crackle of pleasure raced through his blood as he touched the fourth segment to his precious amulet collection.

It didn't fit.

He turned, twisted, and tilted the wedge, but it would not mold to the others. *Why? I snatched it from the girl's neck in the Baiga camp. It was the same amulet piece she had worn in both visions.*

Instantly, a heavy black shadow of loathing fell upon him. Gnashing his teeth, he crushed the offending amulet imitation and let the powder trickle through his tight fist as each cell of his body burst with a blazing tempest. Sparkles of blue light popped and crackled between the digits.

Waves of anger washed through his mind, pummeling against the thin barrier of his skin. Without an outlet to assuage his violent urges, he clenched his fists and buried the power deep within him. *The girl! She tricked me!*

Anger pulsed at his temples as he considered Kelsey Hayes. She reminded him of another from centuries ago: Deschen, the tigers' mother. *Now there was a woman full of fire*, he remembered—unlike his own wife whom he had killed when she bore him a girl, Yesubai. He'd wanted a son. An heir. *My son and I would have ruled the world.*

After his disappointment with the birth of his daughter, he'd come up with a new plan—kill Rajaram and take Deschen for his own bride. Part of the fun would have been breaking her spirit. The fight would have been exquisite.

Deschen was long gone now, and fortunately, the tigers had brought him Kelsey. She was more than he bargained for. *Much* more. Slowly, his seething rage transformed into something else. It cooked and bubbled in his mind, thoughts forming and bursting like cankerous blisters until his determination boiled down to a dark, maddening desire.

*Kelsey* had the same fiery bravery that Deschen had possessed, and he would have a perverse pleasure taking her away from the sons of Rajaram. Suddenly, his fingers itched to touch her fine skin again. How pleasant it would be to put his knife to her flesh. As he pondered that thought, he ran a finger along the sharp edge of the broken glass window. *Perhaps* he would even let the tigers live so he could revel in the turmoil

it would cause them. *Yes. Caging the princes and making them watch as I subdue the girl will be highly pleasurable. Especially after this.*

*So long. I've waited so long.*

Only one thought calmed him: The battle was far from over. He would find her. His team was already searching all over India, monitoring Durga's temples, and watching every transportation hub by land, air, and sea. He was a man who took no risks and left no stone unturned. He would strike again. After all, she was only a girl.

*Soon, he thought. Lokesh shuddered as he imagined touching her again. He could almost sense her. I wonder what she'll sound like when she screams.* It surprised him that he was almost looking forward to capturing the girl more than to obtaining the amulet. The need to have her was vicious. It tore through him as his fingers itched again. Soon he would have the girl and unite the pieces of the amulet. *Once I get my hands on her though, I'll have to be patient. Rushing things has been my downfall.*

He twisted one of the rings on his finger. Perhaps he shouldn't have expected grappling with the tigers to be easy. They'd caused so much trouble the first time. However, they weren't the only predators in India. He too was a creature to be feared. He was like a shark, cutting silently, swiftly, and fatally through the water.

Lokesh smiled. Sharks were creatures to admire, the ultimate predator, the dominant fish in the ocean. In the animal world, predators are born. However, a man chooses to be a predator, ripping to pieces those who stand against him, cracking the backbones of all who would oppose, and swallowing his enemies. He chooses to be the predator, or he chooses to be the prey.

Long ago Lokesh had decided to be at the top of the food chain. Now there was only one family and one young girl left that stood in his way. *And no girl stands a chance after I catch the scent of her blood in the water.*

Lokesh thoughtfully stroked his beard and smiled as he pictured circling her. The waters were chummed. They would never see him coming.

# Living without love

**L***s he going to do it?*

I stared at Ren, searching for a hint of emotion.

A full minute ticked by. The second he made his choice, I knew it.

Ren stretched out his hand to make his move.

“I win.” He smiled as he knocked Kishan’s pawn off the board and moved his HOME. He sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. “Told you,” he said. “I never lose at Parcheesi.”

It had been more than a month since we rescued Ren from being tortured and held prisoner at Lokesh’s Baiga camp and three weeks since my terrible birthday party—and life was purgatory. Even though I gave him my journal and used up all the flour baking my mom’s famous double-chocolate peanut-butter cookies, Ren sadly had no memory of me. Something had happened with Lokesh to cause Ren’s amnesia. Now we were reunited, but we weren’t together.

Still, I refused to give up hope that somehow he might miraculously recover our past, and I was determined to free him. Even if Ren could never be mine again, I had made a commitment to seek the other two gifts to fulfill the goddess Durga’s prophecy and break the tiger’s curse so that both princes could once again be normal men. The least I could do for the man I loved was to not let him down.

Every day being near Ren but not being *with* him was harder than



the last. Mr. Kadam did his best to distract me, and Ren's brother, Kishan, respected my feelings and stood by me as a supportive friend, though every look and touch made it very clear he was still interested in something more.

Neither Ren nor I knew how to act around each other. The four of us seemed to be walking on eggshells, waiting for something, anything, to happen. Only Nilima, Mr. Kadam's great-great-great granddaughter seemed to keep us all breathing, eating, and sane.

One particularly tear-filled night, I found Mr. Kadam in the peacock room. He was reading a book by the soft light of a lamp. I sat down next to him, put my head on his knee, and cried softly. He patted my back and hummed an Indian lullaby. Eventually, I calmed down and shared my fears. I told him I was worried that Ren was lost to me and asked him if a broken heart could really heal.

"You already know the answer to that, Miss Kelsey. Was your heart full and happy when you were with Ren before?"

"Yes."

"Your heart wasn't too damaged to love Ren because of your parents' death?"

"No. But those are two different kinds of love."

"It's different in some ways but the same in others. Your capacity for love does not ebb. You love your parents still, do you not?"

"Of course."

"Then I would suggest that what you are feeling is not the scarring or the diminishing of your heart, but the absence of your loved one."

I looked at the wise Indian businessman and sighed. "It's pretty sad when I feel the absence of my loved one while he's standing in the same room."

"It is," Mr. Kadam admitted. "Maybe it would be best to do nothing."

"You mean let him go?"

He patted my arm and, after considering a moment, said, "One of my sons once caught a small bird with an injured wing. He longed to care for it and keep it for a pet. One day he brought his bird to me. It was dead. He explained that the bird had healed and flapped its wings. But my son panicked and caught the bird before it flew away. He held it so tightly it suffocated.

"The bird may have chosen to stay with my son or may have flown away. Either of those events would have led to a happier conclusion. If the bird had left, my son would have been sad, but he would have remembered it with a smile. Instead, my son was devastated by the death of his pet and had a very hard time recovering from the experience."

"So you *are* saying to let Ren go."

"What I'm saying is . . . you will be happier if *he* is happy."

"Well, I definitely don't want to smother Ren to death." I sighed and tucked my legs under me. "I don't want to *avoid* him either. I like being around him and avoiding him would make finishing Durga's quest together difficult."

"May I suggest trying to be his friend?"

"He was always my friend. Maybe if I could get that part of him back, I won't feel like I've lost everything."

"I think you are right."

*Friends with Ren?* I pondered as I pulled out the ribbon holding my braid and climbed the stairs to turn in. *Well, something is better than nothing, and right now I have a whole lot of nothing going on.*

The next day Mr. Kadam and Nilima had set out a brunch. They'd already come and gone, but I found Ren in the kitchen piling a plate high with fruit and sweet rolls. He looked more like himself every day. His tall frame was filling out, and his dark hair had regained its glossy

sheen. His gorgeous blue eyes watched me with a concerned expression as I took a plate.

When I got to the strawberries, I bumped him with my hip and he froze.

“Can you move down a bit please?” I asked. “I’d like to have a go at those cheese Danishes before Kishan gets here.”

Ren snapped out of it. “Sure. Sorry.”

He set his plate on the table, and I took the seat across from him. He watched me as he slowly peeled the paper away from a muffin. My face burned slightly from his attention.

“Are you okay?” he began haltingly. “I heard you crying last night.”

“I’m fine.”

He grunted and started eating but kept his eyes on me. When he was half finished, he looked away.

“Are you *sure*? I’m sorry if I upset you . . . again. I just don’t remember—”

I stopped him right there by raising my hand. “How you feel is how you feel, Ren.”

“Still, I apologize for hurting your feelings,” he said softly.

I stabbed my melon with a fork. Despite my protestations and my attempt to be nonchalant, I was having a hard time following Mr. Kadam’s advice. My eyes felt hot.

“Which time? On my birthday when you said I’m not attractive or that you can’t stand being in the same room with me or when you said Nilima is beautiful or—”

“Okay, I get the point.”

“Good, because I’d like to drop it.”

After a moment, he elaborated, “By the way, I didn’t say you weren’t attractive. I just said you’re young.”

“So is Nilima by *your* standards. You’re more than three hundred years old!”

"That's true." He grinned lopsidedly in an attempt to get me to smile.

"Technically, you should be dating a very old lady." A tiny smile passed my lips.

He grimaced. "I also want you to know that you're perfectly easy to be around and very likeable. I've never had this reaction to anyone before. I get along with almost everyone. There's no legitimate reason why I should feel the need to escape when you walk into a room."

"Other than the pressure to remember, you mean?"

"It's not the pressure. It's something . . . else. But I've decided to ignore it."

"Can you do that?"

"Sure. The longer I stay near you the more intense the response. It's not talking with you that's hard; it's just being in close proximity. We should try talking on the phone and see if that makes a difference. I'll just work on building up immunity."

"I see. So your goal is to build up a tolerance for me." I sighed. "Okay."

"I'll keep trying, Kelsey."

"Don't strain yourself *too* much, because it doesn't matter anymore. I've decided to just be friends with you."

He leaned forward and said conspiratorially, "But aren't you still, you know, in love with me?"

I leaned forward too. "I don't want to talk about that anymore."

Ren folded his arms across his chest. "Why not?"

"Because Lois Lane never suffocated Superman."

"What are you talking about?"

"We'll have to watch the movie. The point is, I'm done holding you back, so if you want to date Nilima, go for it."

"Wait a minute! You're just going to cut me off?"

"Is that a problem?"

"I didn't say it was a problem. It's just that I've been reading your

journal, and for a girl who's supposed to be crazy about me, you're sure giving up pretty quickly."

"I'm not *giving up* anything. There's nothing *between* us now to give up."

He stared at me as I speared another piece of fruit.

Rubbing his jaw, he said, "So you want to be friends."

"Yep. No pressure, no tears, no constant reminders of things you forgot, no anything. We'll just start over. A clean slate. We'll learn how to be friends and get along despite your inner trigger to run. What do you say?" I wiped my hand on a napkin and held it out. "Want to shake on it?"

Ren considered, smiled, and took my hand. I pumped his up and down once.

"What are we agreeing on?" Kishan asked as he walked into what was the longest conversation Ren and I had had since before he was captured.

"Kelsey just agreed to give me a demonstration of her lightning ability," Ren smoothly lied. "Being able to shoot fire from your hand is something I've got to see."

I looked at him with a raised eyebrow. He smiled and winked, then stood and took both of our plates to the kitchen sink. Kishan's golden eyes cast a doubtful glance at me, but he sat down and snatched the remaining half of my cheese Danish. I smacked his hand playfully before picking up a towel to help Ren. When we were finished, he swiped the towel from me, snapping it lightly against my thigh. I laughed, enjoying our newfound repartee, and turned to find Kishan frowning at us.

Ren put his arm lightly around my shoulder and dipped his head closer to my ear, "'Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look. He thinks too much; such men are dangerous.' Better keep an eye out for him, Kelsey."

I laughed, glad that he remembered his Shakespeare, if not me. “Don’t worry about Kishan, Caesar. His growl is worse than his bite.”

“Has he bitten you lately?”

“Not recently.”

“Hmm, I’ll keep an eye out for you,” Ren said as he left the room.

“What was all that about?” Kishan growled, giving me a brief glimpse of the fierce black tiger hiding behind his eyes.

“He’s celebrating his emancipation.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve told him that I’d like to be friends.”

Kishan paused, “Is that what *you* want?”

“What *I* want is irrelevant. Being my friend is something he can do. Being my boyfriend is not in the stars right now.”

Kishan kept thankfully silent. I could tell he wanted to offer himself as a replacement, either seriously or in jest, but he bit his tongue. Because he did, I kissed his cheek on my way out.

With the ice finally broken between Ren and me, we all could finally move on and soon settled into a routine. I checked in with my foster parents, Mike and Sarah, every week, telling them virtually nothing but that I was fine and busy assisting Mr. Kadam. I assured them that I’d finished my freshman year at Western Oregon University online and that I’d be spending summer break doing an internship in India.

I practiced martial arts with Kishan in the mornings, had late breakfasts with Ren, and helped Mr. Kadam research the third part of Durga’s prophecy in the afternoons. In the evenings, Mr. Kadam and I cooked dinner together—except when he wanted to make curry. Those nights I made my own dinner, using the Golden Fruit.

After dinner we played games, watched movies, and sometimes read in the peacock room. Kishan stayed in the library only if I was

telling a story, and then he'd curl up at my feet as the black tiger. We began reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* together. Mr. Kadam bought several copies of the play so we could take different parts to read. I liked being able to share those times with Ren.

Mr. Kadam had been right, as usual. Ren did seem happy. Everyone responded to his improved mood, including Kishan, who had somehow changed from a brooding, resentful younger brother into a confident man. Kishan kept his distance, but his golden come-hither eyes made my face burn.

Sometimes in the evenings, I'd find Ren in the music room playing his guitar. He'd strum through songs and laugh when I requested "My Favorite Things" from *The Sound of Music*. One such night, Ren played the song he'd written for me. I watched him carefully, hoping a memory might be coming back. He was concentrating deeply as he picked softly through the notes. He kept getting stuck and started over again several times.

When he caught my gaze, he dropped his hands and grinned sheepishly. "I'm sorry. I just can't seem to remember this one. Do you have a request this evening?"

"No," I said curtly and stood.

Ren took my hand but dropped it quickly. "What is it? You're sad. More than usual."

"That song . . . it's—"

"The song? Have you heard it before?"

"No," I lied and smiled sadly, "It's . . . lovely." I squeezed his hand and stumbled away before he could ask any more questions. I wiped a tear from my cheek as I climbed the stairs. I could hear him working on the song again, trying to figure out where the notes belonged.

Another evening, I was relaxing on the veranda, smelling the night jasmine, and looking up at the stars when I overheard Kishan and Ren talking.

“You’ve changed,” Ren pointed out to his brother. “You’re not the same man you were six months ago.”

“I can still whip your white hide if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“No, it’s not that. You’re still a powerful fighter. But now, you’re more relaxed, more certain, more . . . composed.” He laughed. “And much harder to get riled up.”

Kishan replied softly, “She’s changed me. I’ve been working hard to become the kind of man she needs, the kind of man she already believes me to be.”

Ren didn’t respond, and the two entered the house. I sat quietly, thinking deeply about Kishan’s words. *Who knew life and love would be so complicated?*

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