



# tiger's destiny

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The NEW YORK TIMES bestselling TIGER'S CURSE series









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*by* COLLEEN HOUCK



**SPLINTER**

New York

# SPLINTER

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*For my brother Jared and his wife, Suki,  
who provide fan support, tech support  
battle-scene support, moral support,  
and, most important,  
keeping-it-fun support*



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# rising phoenix

By Colleen Houck

*Does Rising Phoenix know his fate?  
He's born, grows strong, and learns to fly.  
He builds a nest and seeks a mate,  
He sleeps and thirsts and hunts the sky.*

*Does he know his future blazes?  
A quelling flame will take his life?  
When purging heat the pyre raises,  
Consuming all his earthly strife?*

*Does stinging dread seep through his breast?  
Does he regret past choices made?  
Does heartbreak stir his feather'd crest?  
Does he perceive the price he's paid?*

*Exquisite once, his body burns  
As he cries out in pain and fear.  
Charred and black his feathers turn,  
Conceding life, he sheds a tear.*

*From death so dire, another soul  
Emerges new to take his place.  
With destiny and purpose whole  
A glorious dawn begins apace!*

*Does Rising Phoenix thank his sire  
For embers black that gave him birth?  
Does he too know his fate is fire?  
Can he enjoy his time on Earth?*



## PROLOGUE



# space and time

**a**ll at once, they were lost, swirling through the inky black whirlwind of time. Seconds passed. Eons passed. Molecules shifted and stirred. Then, a light pierced the cosmic dust and just as suddenly, a wave of understanding washed over him.

Through trial and error, he had learned how to control the vortex and skip through the years. If he ran too fast, he entered an unknown future. If he stepped back in haste, the world ceased to exist. Time required a delicate hand, an exacting touch. At first he bounced roughly through millennia, like a smooth stone skipping on a lake. But soon he moved in a dance with the cosmos, practicing the steps that would take him to the places he needed to see.

He scanned the centuries as if they were books in a library. When he was finished, he knew his place in the universe and how to best serve those he loved.

Sensing she was ready, he smiled and squeezed her hand. Then he gathered her close and shifted them between the stars, moving them to the beginning of the end and the end that would lead to a beginning.







## pursued

Locking on the waves of the ocean, I dreamt I was swimming with a great dragon who winked at me. As he moved past me with a flick of his tail, my body jostled. I moaned and struggled as rough hands wrenched my limbs. The drone of an engine replaced the sound of the waves, and my dreams shifted. Suddenly, I was in a forest and I could clearly hear the steady thunder of tiger paws against jungle leaves running toward me.

Nightmares began after that. Sharks in the water, pirates on the *Deschen*, being captured by Lokesh's men.

A voice whispered urgently in the distance, *Wake up, Kelsey.*

Dizzily, I cracked open my eyes. I was lying on a four poster bed. *It was all just a terrible dream*, I thought gratefully.

The setting sun poured its waning light through the window above the bed. The window had thick glass and bars running across it, preventing anyone from getting in . . . or out.

"No!" I shouted to the empty room. It wasn't a dream at all. I tried to remember everything. I had gone on three quests to free Ren and his brother, Kishan, from the Tiger's Curse. We only had one more gift to find for the goddess Durga in order to break the spell. We were on a ship, and there had been a battle with Lokesh. That much I knew. Then

three tiny pricks (tranquilizer darts?), a motorboat . . . placing Fanindra and the amulet into the water, and then blackness.

I was locked in a strange bedroom, a prisoner in a cage. I raced to the door and pulled uselessly at the knob. Focusing my inner energy, I lifted my arm to blast the lock open but nothing happened. Confused, my hand flew to my throat to touch the goddess Durga's Black Pearl Necklace.

*How did I lose my fire power? Where am I? Where are my tigers, Ren and Kishan? Did Fanindra find them? What happened to Mr. Kadam and Nilima? Are they on their way to rescue me? How am I going to get out of here?*

I tried to take stock of the situation. I had the Pearl Necklace, and the Divine Scarf was still threaded through the belt loops of my jeans, but Durga's bow and arrows and the Golden Fruit of India were nowhere in sight. Stifling a bitter laugh, I realized that I could make all the water and fabric I wanted with all that remained of Durga's gifts, as if that was going to help me.

I casually felt between my fingers for the small tracking device Mr. Kadam had painfully implanted. It was still there, which meant there was a chance the cavalry could come rushing in to save me. It was a small chance, but it was all I had.

My head hurt, and my mouth felt like it was full of cotton. I tried to swallow and ended up coughing, which made me feel even worse.

*Get a grip, Kelsey Hayes!* I thought and forced myself to try to make sense of my surroundings. Through the window, there were trees and snow, and I was at least three stories up. I thought I could make out some mountains but there was no way to figure out where I was being held.

My stomach heaved and I lunged for the bathroom. After rinsing out my mouth, I stared at my reflection. A crumpled, haggard, frightened woman looked back at me. *What happened to the girl from Oregon?*

Just then, a silky voice broke through my thoughts. I froze. It was my captor, Lokesh.

“Please dress for an early dinner, my dear. As you can see, there is no escape, and I have confiscated your weapons. It’s time we meet again. I have a proposal to make to you, Kelsey Hayes. I believe that it is time for you to embrace your destiny.”

My insides lurched again as I contemplated what kind of destiny Lokesh had in mind for me. I couldn’t see any cameras or speakers in the room, but I knew I was being watched. Strangely, I felt detached from my situation. The cold fear I’d experienced when facing Lokesh in each vision had been replaced with shaky determination.

I considered my options. First, I needed to get out of this room and map out possible escape routes. This predicament could only end in one of four ways: I’d escape on my own (possible); Ren and Kishan would rescue me; I’d die (definitely not my first choice); or I’d end up being the kept woman of a psychopath, which didn’t sound like much fun either. I also needed to recover the Fruit and my bow and arrows. Durga had warned me that if her weapons fell into the wrong hands the results would be devastating. I bit my lip and hoped I wouldn’t have to choose between saving myself or the weapons.

*If getting out of this room means having dinner with the devil, so be it. For now I’ll play his game, but if I’m going to go down, I’m going to go down fighting.*

Instinctually, I knew that playing a damsel in distress wouldn’t work. To beat Lokesh at his own game, I’d have to become something I wasn’t—a woman who was strong, beautiful, powerful, and self-assured.

After perusing the closet and finding only a form-fitting sheath with a plunging neckline, I decided to take a calculated risk. I asked the Scarf to create me new clothes in the quietest way possible and instructed it not to do any of its kaleidoscope color changes.

Pulling the new outfit from the closet, I marveled at its detail. The Scarf had created a glamorous *lehenga* in gold and cobalt blue. The short-sleeved jacquard top cinched my waist, and the tight, long-skirted *lehenga* hugged my curves. Wearing Ren's and Kishan's colors gave me a dose of much-needed courage, and I thought the fancy dress would help me act the part I intended to play. The Scarf had even made me a pair of sapphire-like dangling earrings from a lightweight fabric.

Just as I finished dressing, a tall, lean, and dangerous-looking servant opened my bedroom door. I begged him to let me go, but he shook his head and replied something unintelligible in Hindi. I stuffed the Scarf up my sleeve, tried to recall the few Hindi words I knew, and repeated my plea for help, "*Trabi!*" But the man just led me down a hall lined with more barred windows, thick carpeting, and paneled walls.

Next, we walked through a series of locked doors, each guarded by a sentry. As another door slammed shut and locked behind me, I had the sudden recollection that this was how Ren's cage at the circus had been set up—doors within doors to protect the humans from the tiger. I quickly made a mental note: *Escaping on my own will be difficult if not impossible. But, on the plus side, Lokesh believes that he needs a high level of security to contain me. Maybe there's a way to use that against him somehow.*

The last door opened into a dining room where a table had been set for two. The servant pulled out a chair and gestured that I should sit before he quietly left the room. I toyed with my butter knife as I waited. My stomach twisted with nerves, and I wondered how I'd be able to face Lokesh alone. On our previous quests to break the Tiger's Curse, I'd battled a Kraken and a megashark. But somehow those beasts didn't seem quite as dangerous as the evil I was now up against, the monster that had turned my two Indian princes into tigers more than three centuries ago.

"How nice of you to accept my invitation to dinner," Lokesh said, suddenly appearing in the seat across from me.

He looked different from the last time I saw him. Younger. Though I still recognized the black malice swirling behind his black eyes, I was able to pull myself together. Lokesh picked up my hand and kissed it roughly.

"It's not like I was given a choice," I replied.

"Yes." He smiled and squeezed my hand just a bit too hard. "I didn't give you a choice of clothing either," he continued, "and yet, here you are, dressed in a different garment. Might I inquire as to where you obtained it?"

In one smooth motion, I covered my knife with my dinner napkin, scooped it onto my lap, and slid the utensil carefully into my pocket. Hoping he hadn't noticed, I remarked derisively, "When you tell me where *your* power comes from, I'll be happy to show you how to create a wardrobe from the air." A new surge of courage ran through me now that I finally had a weapon of sorts.

To my surprise, Lokesh laughed. "How delightful it is to be around a woman with spirit. I think I shall be tolerant of you, *for now*. But don't test my patience."

His smile turned into a leer. Up close, Lokesh looked more Asian than Indian. His dark hair was cut short, parted on the side, and smoothed to the nape of his neck—quite unlike Ren, whose hair always fell into his blue eyes.

The sorcerer moved with tight control, keeping his shoulders and back stiff. He was more muscular and handsome than before, even striking. But I knew the madman lurked beneath, and his features still carried an undercurrent of darkness.

Food was brought and our plates were quickly filled with spicy Indian selections. The servants were efficient and utterly silent. I picked at my meal, struggling to find my appetite.

"Did you use sorcery to look younger?" I asked cautiously.

His black eyes darkened but then he smiled. "Yes, do you find me



handsome? Does it make you more comfortable to see me closer to your own age?"

Strangely, it did.

I shrugged. "I'd be uncomfortable no matter how you looked. Why do you care anyway? I'm surprised you don't have me chained in the basement preparing to drive screws through my thumbs."

A crackle of blue light caught my attention, and I looked up. But if it had been there before, it was gone now. Lokesh frowned and rubbed his fingers.

"Would you prefer to be chained in the basement?" Lokesh asked casually, teasing in a disturbingly lecherous way.

"No, I'm just curious. Why am I getting the special treatment?"

"You get the *special treatment* because you are special, Kelsey. As you demonstrated tonight, you have powers of your own, and I'd prefer not to stifle them." He clucked with disappointment. "It would seem that you don't understand me at all. I'm sure my cause has been misrepresented. Now that you have the chance to get to know me better, I think you'll find that I am not a difficult man to please."

I leaned forward, seeing an opportunity to challenge him. "Somehow, I doubt Ren would agree with that assessment."

Lokesh dropped his fork with a clatter and then smoothly covered his rage. "The *prince* rebelled at every opportunity. That is why he was treated so . . . harshly. I hope that *your* response to me will be different."

I cleared my throat and answered, "I suppose that all depends upon what it is that you want from me."

Lokesh took a sip from his goblet while eyeing me shrewdly over its edge. "What I want, my dear, is the opportunity to show you what a man of power truly is. It would be a mistake to continue to ally yourself with the tigers. They have no real power, not like you or I. In fact, the amulet cursed them. It was never meant for them. I am the one destined to unite the pieces. I am the one the Damon Amulet calls to."

I dabbed my lips with my napkin, stalling, as a crazy plan started to come together. *If it's a powerful opponent he wants, I'll give him one. Time to put my one drama class to good use. Act One: Dinner with a mysterious girl with superhuman powers, a bad attitude, and nerves of steel. It's showtime. . . .*

"As you probably know, I no longer have a piece of the amulet. If you were hoping to *flatter* me out of my piece, you will be sorely disappointed."

"Yes, your precious tigers must have it. Perhaps they will bring it with them when they try to rescue you."

Startled, I paused, but only for a split second. "And what makes you think they're coming?"

"Come now, my dear Kelsey. I've seen how they look at you. You've captivated them even more effectively than my daughter Yesubai did. You are not as beautiful as Yesubai, but there is daring and defiance in your eyes. I suspect the only reason that Dhiren survived my interrogation techniques is because he wanted to return to you. Both princelings are crippled by their love for you. It makes them weak and stupid."

*Here goes nothing.* I gave Lokesh a simpering smile. "Perhaps you will fall into the same trap they did," I threatened.

"Are you saying that you *tricked* the princes into falling for you? For if you did, my estimation of you has risen."

While terrifying at first, the playacting actually strengthened my spirit. My fear melted down to a little nub in the pit of my stomach, becoming just small enough to ignore. I licked my lips in a deliberately slow attempt to distract him.

"A smart woman uses all the tools at her disposal to obtain what she desires."

Lokesh narrowed his eyes, meeting my verbal volley. "And what is it that you desire, Kelsey?"

Channeling a brazen Scarlett O'Hara, I laughed throatily. "Surely you don't expect me to give away all my secrets during our first meeting.

I'm not that naive. But . . . if you wish to put our cards on the table now, tell me. What do you want from me?"

"Ally yourself with me instead of the tigers."

"How?" I asked, trying desperately not to shudder at the thought.

Suddenly, I felt a tingling sensation creep over my skin. It didn't hurt, but it was intimate, invasive. A slight breeze lingered over my bare arms and circled my throat. Invisible fingers slid up my neck and into my hair and then trailed down to my collarbone. Although he hadn't moved a muscle, I was sure Lokesh was to blame. I did my best to ignore it.

The sorcerer leaned forward and chuckled portentously. "My purpose here is twofold: It gives me pleasure to steal you away from the princes. Imagining their distress is gratifying. But the real reason is to combine our powers in every way possible . . . with a son."

"A son," I replied smoothly, despite the fact that my stomach was doing flip-flops. "Why me? I mean, why after all these years? I suppose I'm just shocked that you haven't already found the Bonnie to your Clyde, the Morticia to your Gomez. Wasn't hooking up with Yesubai's mother enough?"

Lokesh hissed, "Yesubai's mother was a simpering idiot. She was beautiful but she cowered before me. She was *not* my equal."

"It probably didn't help that you killed her either."

This time he didn't bother to hide the angry blue crackles at his fingertips.

"Careful," I warned, "If you show me yours, I'll have to show you mine, and we would spoil this lovely conversation we're having."

He closed his eyes and got himself under control.

"Suppose I agree to your proposal, give you an heir, and share my power with you. I want something in return. You once said that if I stayed with you willingly, you would allow the tigers to live. Will you keep your word?"

"Whether or not you agree is immaterial."

*Time for Act Two: Mysterious girl shows off her powers.* I pulled the Scarf out from my sleeve. Holding it in my palm, I asked it to change colors. It obliged, changing first to red and then to blue when I pressed it to my cheek. Lokesh stared at the Scarf with fascination. I raised an eyebrow, and the Scarf shot threads across the room, creating a large web. Then it shrank back down into a white handkerchief, which I folded and set next to my plate.

"What if I shared this power with you?" I asked nonchalantly.

If he was impressed, it was only for a moment. Lokesh narrowed his eyes, tossed his napkin onto his plate, and approached my side of the table. Roughly, he took my arm to yank me to my feet, smiling when he saw the look of terror on my face.

"I will consider allowing the tigers to live if you do what I ask willingly."

As if to seal the deal, Lokesh stroked my cheek and leaned close to whisper in my ear. "Tell me, Kelsey, what amuses you? What," he breathed heavily, "frightens you?"

When I didn't answer, he chuckled—then yanked me closer and viciously kissed me, biting my lip hard. As he finally let me go, I wiped my bruised lip with a thumb and glared at him.

Lokesh laughed happily. "And still you are defiant. You will give me much pleasure, Kelsey."

"Glad you think so," I spat, now more angry than afraid.

"You see, my dear, I care nothing for the tigers except to get their amulets. If you give me a son and help me gain the power I seek, I will leave the tigers alone. Now that the terms have been settled, I will show you back to your room so you might reflect on your decision. I look forward to getting to know you better," he declared with a leer that made me shiver.

Taking a deep breath, I snatched up the Scarf, gingerly placed one hand on my pocket, and let Lokesh escort me back to my prison.

"We shall talk more of alliances tomorrow, my pet," he whispered breathily in my ear. "And do return the knife you took from the table."

The comment took me by surprise, but I tried to maintain an even expression. Smiling, I took the butter knife from my pocket and pressed the tip lightly against his chest. "You can't blame a girl for trying."

Delighted, he wrapped his fingers around mine and tugged the knife out of my hand, harshly scraping the blade against my palm. Seeing that he drew blood, Lokesh brought my stinging palm to his mouth. I watched vile ecstasy overtake him as he kissed my palm and licked the red droplets from his lips.

At last he let me go with a final threat. "I'll be watching your every move, my dear. I look forward to our . . . exchanges in the future."

The door closed behind me, and I heard the click of a heavy lock, happy for a change to be separated from him by dozens of thick, metal bars.

*Curtain falls*, I thought and collapsed onto my bed, completely drained, and wondering how on earth I was going to get myself out of this latest mess.